

# “Marginalized” Medea: The Role of Chorus in Shaping Medea’s Political and Feminist Identities

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## Abstract:

Euripides’ play *Medea* has always been the subject of academic interest and increasingly so in the last few years due to the rise of feminism. However, research concerning the role of chorus in Medea’s characterization is scant, leaving many details unexplored. This paper examines the chorus’s role in shaping Medea’s two most important identities: her political identity as an outsider, and her feminist identity as a wife and mother. By using the methods of textual analysis and close reading, this research seeks to provide in-depth and detailed insights into Medea’s characterization and the broader social background of ancient Greece. Close analysis reveals that the chorus presents Medea’s identities through both direct exposition and implicit suggestion. The chorus’s direct description of and reflection upon Medea’s situations, the delicate relationships between the chorus and Medea and their interactions enrich her identity in various ways. The circumstances of Medea are also an epitome of the entire marginalized female group in ancient Greece, who suffer from prejudice and social restrictions.

**Keywords:** Medea; chorus; textual analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Euripides’ *Medea* holds a unique place in ancient Greek literature, even the whole Western literature. Her story has fascinated readers and scholars alike for centuries, making her one of the most studied figures in Greek tragedy. Medea’s tale of revenge, betrayal, and extreme emotional turmoil is not only a powerful narrative but also a rich source of insight into human nature and the human condition, especially the situation of being a woman and an outsider. In recent years, Medea has even been embraced as a

feminist icon, embodying the struggles and complexities of womanhood, and symbolizing the rebellion against the patriarchal society.

Previous research on *Medea* has explored a wide range of perspectives, with a significant focus on her being an outsider in the city-state, and an increasing interest in feminist interpretations. Typically, her situation as a “barbarian” unwelcomed by the local people has been heatedly discussed. Some studies place Medea within the post-colonial context and Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity, concluding that

her act of infanticide is actually a resistance against the oppression of the society [1]. Feminist scholars have examined her significance in the rebellion against patriarchal society and delved into the reasons behind Medea's decision to kill her children in the perspective of motherhood and womanhood. Some scholars examine the figure of Medea as a feminist and the evolution of her depiction through time while others show Medea's influence in feminism through the view of phallogentrism, arguing that her personality and ability enable her to temporarily break from the patriarchal constraints by conducting infanticide, which ends in high consequences [2, 3]. Additionally, scholars have also analyzed the themes of fate, the traditional hero, morality, and justice in the play, forming a comprehensive research circle [4, 5].

Aside from these themes, the chorus is also an essential element in this play, as well as in the larger context of ancient Greek dramas. According to scholars, the Greek tragedy has its origin in the chorus, especially those of the Dionysiac rituals of the ancient Greek society [6]. Some scholars emphasize the chorus's role as witnesses to the tragedy, arguing for their passiveness in reaction to the events and their role as a moral commentator [7], while others highlight their role as active participants, reflecting communal values and shared experiences of Greek life [8]. The chorus's function in dramas has been summarized into primarily two dimensions, narrative and lyrical, which are displayed perfectly with innovation in its narrative function and the incorporation of psychological descriptions [9].

However, the chorus's role in characterization has been largely ignored, since few studies have been conducted on this topic. It can be seen that there is a noticeable gap in the research regarding how the chorus contributes to Medea's characterization, especially her two most important identities, her political identity as an outsider, and her feminist identity as a wife and mother. The chorus is not merely a passive commentator in the play, instead, it plays a crucial role in shaping the audience's perception of Medea and her actions.

This paper aims to contribute to filling this gap by focusing on the role of the chorus in Medea's characterization. By analyzing the interactions between Medea and the chorus, as well as the chorus's commentary on the events of the play, this study seeks to uncover how the chorus serves to influence the audience's understanding of Medea's two identities, which are central to this play. And through the figure of Medea, insights can be gained on the situations of the marginalized group in the Greek society, outsiders and women, shedding light on their sufferings and difficulties.

This article uses the methods of textual analysis and close

reading. Textual analysis is employed to interpret and understand the content and meaning of texts by examining how language, symbols, and structure within a text convey ideas and emotions. The comments of the chorus and the interaction between the chorus and Medea are analyzed to present Medea's situation as an outsider and a woman in full detail. Textual analysis provides richer and deeper insights into the meaning conveyed and culture presented through the text. Close reading examines specific fragments of texts including individual sentences and words, in order to find hidden meanings of the text and provide more detailed interpretation. Specific phrases of the chorus in describing Medea, for example, are examined to present the delicate relationship between the chorus and Medea, revealing her isolation as an outsider.

The ultimate goal of this research is to enrich the scholarly understanding of Medea by analyzing the often-overlooked role of the chorus in characterization, and hopefully provide material for future research related to this topic.

## 2. The Political Identity: an Outsider

Medea's awkward position as an outsider in the city of Corinth is vividly portrayed through the chorus's description of and reflection on her situations, and more implicitly through her delicate relationships with the chorus. The characterization of her as an outsider in a Greek city also provides a valuable lens for studying the social and political atmosphere of the time, since tragedy is an imitation of actions in real life, offering us a window into the realities of the ancient world.

In this section, the analysis is divided into two parts, the direct description and the implicit expressions. The first part focuses on the chorus's words addressing the plight of Medea as an outsider in a straightforward way; whereas in the second part, Medea's situation is revealed only through detailed analysis of her relationships with the chorus, where she is found to suffer from prejudiced beneath the disguise of the chorus's friendliness, making it more implicit.

### 2.1 Direct Description and Reflection

The chorus's direct description of Medea's plight and conditions all contribute to enriching and revealing Medea's identity as an outsider in Corinth in a rather straightforward way. The chorus's depiction of Medea's circumstances directly points out her isolation and helplessness. In the first stasimon, they describe her as "sailed away from your father's house, heart mad with frenzy, threading through the sea's twin rocks, and now you dwell on foreign soil [10]," emphasizing her physical displacement, being on a foreign land far from home. The chorus also

sings about her social isolation and emotional helplessness. Upon learning about her exile, they exclaim “Where on earth will you turn? To what foreign land? What house or land will you find to save you from harm [10],” which further emphasizes her predicament, illustrating that she has no refuge, no homeland to offer sanctuary. The chorus continues, lamenting, “You have no father’s house, unhappy one, to offer anchorage from your toils [10],” underscoring the harsh realities of Medea’s life as an isolated and helpless foreigner in Greece. Such description directly displays Medea’s isolation and helplessness as an outsider on a foreign land.

The chorus’s reflection also illustrates Medea’s predicament. In the second stasimon, they sing that death is more preferable than leaving their homeland [10]. Such a sentiment reveals their deep attachment to their city and their national pride, which likely leads them to view those from outside their city as inferior. Moreover, the chorus’s reflections highlight the immense suffering that accompanies exile, a punishment perceived as worse than death. In this way, the chorus invites the audience to contemplate the profound agony Medea endures, even if her departure is self-chosen.

Furthermore, the chorus describes the loss of one’s city as “a life intractable, a life unnavigable, most pitiful of griefs [10],” which reveals the harsh situation faced by foreigners, who are portrayed as powerless, without help, and socially isolated. Medea, in this portrayal, becomes a figure of pity.

## 2.2 Implicit Expressions

The chorus’s descriptions and reflections reveal the harshness of society Medea faces as an outsider, which is conveyed in a direct and unambiguous manner. However, Medea’s social and political identity as an outsider is also more subtly expressed through her relationship with the chorus.

On the surface, the chorus shows apparent friendliness toward Medea, frequently using the term *friendship*. Nevertheless, cracks and clues suggest that the relationship between Medea and the chorus is not as harmonious as it appears. For instance, they remain silent when Medea asks them to keep her plans confidential and attempt to dissuade her from murdering her own children.

One indication lies in how they address each other. When they first meet, they refer to one another by their origins rather than by more personal names. The chorus calls Medea “the unhappy woman of Colchis” [10], while Medea addresses the chorus as “women of Corinth [10]” and refers to herself as a “foreigner” [10]. These specific choices of addresses create a barrier between them – on one side,

the natives of Corinth, and on the other, an outsider not yet integrated into their society. The manner of address epitomizes their actual treatment of one another, as words embody the speaker’s thoughts and guide their actions. From this, it may be inferred that their treatment of each other is not as welcoming as it might seem on the surface. More overt evidence of this delicate relationship can be found in the chorus’s evaluations of Medea and her actions. Upon close analysis, it becomes apparent that the chorus consistently uses harsh and critical language to describe Medea, such as “her mind’s fierce temper”, “the torrent of her grief is surging mightily”, “heart mad with frenzy”, and “this wretch, this Fury, bold, bloody and inspired by demons of revenge” [10]. These descriptions consistently highlight Medea’s inability to control her emotions, resulting in anger, grief, or madness, which is a quality typically associated with barbarians and uncivilized peoples, and in this case, people like Medea. Although these characterizations may reflect some truth about Medea’s intense emotions, they are inevitably influenced by a deep-seated prejudice against outsiders, who are viewed as much lower in education and social status.

This prejudice is also shown in the chorus’s depiction of Medea’s homeland, Colchis. Rather than referring to it by name, they describe it as “the dark-blue crags of the Clashing Rocks, that inlet least hospitable to foreigners” [10]. This portrayal presents Colchis as a hostile and inhospitable place, reflecting the biased imagination of the Greeks, who often viewed regions beyond their borders as harsh and unlivable. Ironically, it is Greece that may be “less hospitable to foreigners” due to its societal hostility [10].

Beyond these prejudices against *barbarians*, the chorus ironically judges Medea according to Greek social norms, binding her to values she cannot escape. When Medea sets out to carry out her plan, which includes the murder of her own children, the chorus’s tone becomes accusatory: “How can this city of sacred rivers, this land escorting friends in safety, hold you dwelling in its midst, you the child-murderer, you the unholy” [10]. Here, they judge her actions against the moral standards of Greece, deeming her unworthy of living in such a sacred place, and justifying her exile. This judgment reveals that the chorus considers their own city superior to Medea’s homeland and sees her barbaric actions as rendering her unfit to live in a morally elevated society.

These subtle clues reveal that the relationship between the chorus and Medea is far from simply harmonious or friendly. Medea, as an outsider in the city of Corinth, suffers from both the prejudice against barbarians and social judgement of the Greeks. Although the chorus, as fellow women, should be more sympathetic to Medea, they still

exhibit a lack of decency or kindness, reflecting the mistreatment and isolation that Medea as an outsider, and others in the same position as her, likely endure.

Medea serves as a representation of the foreigners living in Greek cities during Euripides' time. Her experiences mirror those of many others who suffered from the stigma of being outsiders. Due to colonization and increased interactions between cities, the population of "metics", or non-citizens, gradually grows in Greek cities. However, they are not treated equally with native citizens. They are deprived of citizenship, unable to own land, and often have to live in rented accommodations. In Athens, where Euripides lives, only individuals with both parents as Athenian citizens can be recognized as Athenian citizens, significantly limiting marriage between Athenians and outsiders, and casting outsiders to the fringes of society [11]. Similar situations likely exist in other Greek cities. Jason's eagerness to marry the princess of Corinth may reflect an awareness of such laws. He seeks to escape the identity of a foreigner or to secure the birthright for his children [10]. Even if such laws do not exist, his concerns demonstrate that outsiders are not granted equal status with native citizens, a fact largely confirmed by the chorus's attitude toward Medea. Medea's experience is but one of many who suffer from the status of being an outsider.

### 3. The Feminist Identity: a Wife and Mother

Medea's identity as a woman, encompassing both her roles as wife and mother, is depicted through the chorus's explicit explanations and their interactions with Medea. These portrayals not only emphasize Medea's feminist identity but also offer insights into the broader condition of women in ancient Greece, as Medea serves as an epitome of the societal norms and gender dynamics of the time. The scarcity of materials on the status of women in ancient Greece – due to the literary, theatrical, and historical narratives being largely dominated by men – makes this an invaluable opportunity to explore the situation of women in ancient Greece.

This section is likewise divided into two parts. The first part deals with both Medea and the chorus's direct narration of females' various hardships under the specific backdrop. In the second part, however, some implicit words by the chorus seem to deviate from this theme when viewed on the surface, such as wishes for restrained desire, mild response to Medea's fury, and lamentation for the death of her children. Only when put into the whole context of the drama can the hidden feminist meanings of these lines be

brought under the light.

#### 3.1 Direct Feminist Narration

The chorus provides direct comments and reflections on the plight of Medea as a woman within the play, explicitly addressing the challenges Medea faces and the burdens her identity imposes upon her.

Before delving into the chorus's reflections, it is essential to consider Medea's own interpretation of the condition of women, which she articulates while seeking the chorus's sympathy in order to ensure perfect execution of her plan of murder. Medea exhibits a profound awareness of the societal burdens imposed on women and a desire to escape these constraints. She numerates the miseries women endure: financial dependence, subjection to their husbands, uncertainty of familial futures, perpetual and inescapable bonds, and social isolation [10]. She concludes with the famous declaration, "I'd rather stand three times behind a shield in war than give birth to one child" [10]. Although her intention is to extract sympathy, her words are not far from the truth.

The chorus echoes Medea's sentiments and supplements them by elaborating on the difficult situations of being a woman, the burden of motherhood and the plight of voicelessness. The futility of bearing and raising children is detailed in the extended anapestic interlude, where the chorus laments the anxieties of nurturing children, the uncertainty of their worth, and the inevitability of death, which renders all efforts in vain [10]. They conclude by demanding "So where is the profit to us, if the gods in addition to our other troubles inflict on mortals this most grievous of pains, for the sake of children?" [10]. Through these lines, the chorus vividly conveys the laborious tasks women must endure as mothers. The length of their song adds to the exhaustion and toil imagined for women. As a mother, Medea cannot escape these hardships, and her impending act of infanticide only exacerbates her plight, rendering her efforts futile and highlighting the harsh realities faced by the entire women race.

In addition, women's voicelessness is equally explored in the first stasimon. The chorus reveals that men manipulate narratives to tarnish women's reputations, labeling them as malicious and untrustworthy while depriving them of the right to tell their own stories [10]. They suggest that this state of affairs might be challenged by Medea herself, positioning her as a potential beacon of hope for women. Such accusations are close to the reality. Men exert almost total control over the city, as women are denied citizenship and excluded from public life. However, the city's reproduction and prosperity depend on women, implying that women possess a fundamental power over the entire

society [11]. Yet this inherent power instills fear in men, leading them to vilify and control women. Consequently, women are stripped of the means to present their own stories and are forced into silence, overshadowed by men's dominance. Medea, however, is able to voice her own sufferings and her plans for revenge, breaking through the boundaries set by the society, providing a glint of hope for her kind.

### 3.2 Implicit Portrayal of Feminism

These explicit depictions of women's struggles are joined by more implicit ones, collectively portraying the condition of Medea and the broader female experience in the world of ancient Greece.

The chorus's songs reveal the internalization of social restriction of the society, emphasizing the fetters women have to endure. When addressing the theme of desire, they express a wish that Kypris, the goddess of love, would bestow restrained desire, and not "contentious anger or quarrels insatiable" [10]. This reflects the social constraints imposed on women, who are expected to maintain controlled desire, mild temper, and chastity. These qualities are demanded by the society, but become gradually internalized as self-imposed restrictions by women themselves. In ancient Greece, women face severe limitations, such as being confined to the household and prohibited from freely interacting with strangers, to ensure their chastity [11]. The chorus's wishes for themselves reveal that these external societal constraints have become internalized rules, illustrating the profound influence of societal norms on women's minds. Such is the strict societal restriction that Medea is under, restraining her freedom and natural instincts, keeping her in isolation and under the society's hostility. Given that Medea comes from the foreign land of Colchis, where women's status is somewhat higher and where she served as a priestess of Hecate, adapting to the oppressive Greek rules proves challenging [12].

In addition, when the chorus learns of Medea's betrayal by her husband, their restrained reaction contrasts sharply with Medea's intense response, highlighting the bleakness of social norms. Upon hearing Medea's wish for death after finding out about her husband's betrayal, they express surprise and advise, "If your husband reveres a new marriage-bed, don't be provoked at him; Zeus will plead the justice of your cause" [10]. This mild reaction suggests that they are accustomed to and largely unmoved by the betrayal of husbands, revealing the frequency of such occurrences and the low status of women, who have little recourse to reverse their situation or exact proper punishment, relying instead on the gods to administer justice. These social norms are foreign to Medea, who is used to a

higher status for women in her homeland. The restrictions and inequalities that are normalized for the Corinthian women become new and confining shackles for Medea, who becomes bound by her identity as a woman.

The chorus also explores the struggles of Medea as a mother through their implicit exhibitions of her emotions. When Medea finally resolves to kill her children, they question, "Where will you find the boldness of mind or hand or heart, the awful daring to kill them, your own sons? How will you ever be able, looking at them, your children, to seal their bloody fate without a tear? When they fall suppliant for their lives, you will not have the power, your raging heart will not endure, to dye your hands in their blood" [10]. While these words may seem accusatory, criticizing Medea's hard-heartedness and cold-bloodedness, when considered alongside earlier passages, they can be interpreted as reflective of Medea's internal struggle. The thought of killing her children is awful to imagine to her, and she wrestles incessantly with the conflicting demands of her desire for revenge and her maternal love, causing her great anguish. These lines, sung by the chorus, are actually expressing Medea's own self-questioning, revealing her inner struggles. This enhances her portrayal as a mother, not a cold-blooded figure as some might imagine, but one deeply conflicted by love for her children.

In conclusion, the chorus, through direct exposition and implicit suggestion, presents the challenges faced by Medea as a woman, both as a wife and a mother, while also shedding light on the broader plight of women in ancient Greek society. Although women hold relatively important roles in religious ceremonies, they are largely excluded from social and political affairs and depended heavily on their husbands for daily life. They are bound by restrictions imposed both externally by society and internally through gradually internalized norms, which eroded their self-identity [8]. Lacking in ways of self-expression renders women unable to voice their opinions or articulate their sufferings.

## 4. Conclusion

Detailed analysis reveals that the chorus plays an important role in shaping Medea's political identity as an outsider and her feminist identity as a wife and mother. Through direct narration, including the chorus's description of Medea's situation, and implicit expressions, such as relationship between the chorus and Medea and implications of Medea's internal struggle, the chorus presents the plight Medea is under, her suffering from unequal treatment, hidden prejudices, and social restrictions. Moreover, Medea mirrors many marginalized people, particularly underpriv-

ileged females who try to survive in ancient Greece, and her situation provides a lens into theirs. This study strives to address the research gap that there is little material about the role of chorus in Medea's characterization, and seeks to present the condition of marginalized group in ancient Greece, providing materials for future studies.

There are also some limitations to this research. Only textual analysis and close reading are employed in the analysis, making the interpretations somewhat subjective, especially when it comes to interpreting implicit suggestions. Also, by focusing primarily on Medea's political and feminist identities, this research does not consider other possible identities or dimensions, which might be equally important upon close analysis, such as the traditional hero, which can offer a broader interpretation of her character. By focusing on both political and feminist identities, this research may encourage further studies to examine the feminist and political atmosphere of ancient Greece, and the chorus' role not only as a passive commentator but as an active force shaping characters' identity and audience perceptions. This research may also inspire future work to explore how ancient Greek dramas reflect social norms and political backgrounds, pushing the links between literary works and reality.

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