

# Greek Tragedies and Pottery: An Ever-Changing Perception

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how Greek pottery from the fourth century reflects a historic perception of Greek tragedies that differs significantly from that of modern times. By analyzing Euripides' *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, the study contends that the modern interpretation of these two tragedies is centered on the personality of tragic characters and the emotionality of the tragic plot. It is also evident that, by examining modern productions and adaptations of Euripides' plays and relevant literary studies, the modern audience is particularly perceptive of the themes of sex, love, and marriage, which are often incorporated into discourses on contemporary issues. An investigation into the depiction of tragedies in classical pottery, however, highlights the significance of divinity in the historic understanding of the plays, reflecting the Athenian audience's prioritized interest in religion. This paper thus argues that the thematic perception of Greek tragedies is ever-changing throughout ancient and modern times and is greatly influenced by the current of contemporary cultures. The paper also proposes that a theatrical emphasis on religion is conducive to forming a new modern perspective on Greek plays as well as social issues.

## Introduction

Paintings on fourth-century B.C. Greek pots can be seen as the outcome of the interaction between plays and visual art and are a critical reflection of the Athenian audience's response to the tragedies of their time, as exemplified by the ones related to Euripides' *Medea* and *Hippolytus*. The vessels provide evidence suggesting a strong connection of Greek plays with religion, specifically, the admiration of Medea's divinity and wizardry, the establishment of a cult, and the acknowledgement of deities' intervention as the impetus to Hippolytus's tragedy. It is also clear, however, that these Athenian interpretations often differ from the commonly accepted understanding in modern times, which puts more emphasis on love and marriage as themes of these plays. Therefore, Greek vase-paintings, associating literature with art, provide an intriguing narrative on how the perception of Greek tragic themes is shaped by contemporary culture and changes throughout history.

## The Modern Interpretation

In the modern era, tragedies like *Medea* and *Hippolytus* are associated with themes of sex and foreign identity, and, in some cases, are established with certainty as the portrayals of marital conflicts. Conversely, the allusion to religion is rarely seen, whether in theater performances, online popular culture, or more scholarly interpretations. An examination of modern performances offers a direct illustration of how directors and the audience together shape the understanding of Greek plays in the theater. For example, a production of *Medea* by the National Theatre of Scotland that premiered in 2022 describes the play as "the classic drama of the eternal battle of the sexes," highlighting Medea's struggle with Jason, her abandonment, and "hold-your-breath heartbreak

and revenge.”<sup>1</sup> Director of the 2022 performance at Soho Place, Dominic Cooke, considers that “At its core, *Medea* is about the battle between archetypal male and female ideas of power,” and aims to display how a female character refuses to obey male characters and their patriarchal values.<sup>2</sup> Similar themes are also found in the Deutsches Theater production of *Medea. Voices*, written by Christa Wolf. Telling the story from Medea’s perspective, the director presents “how she had to leave her country, discovered a horrendous crime, asked inconvenient questions, and how a mesh of defamations and lies drove her out of the palace.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, when *Medea* was adapted to Hebei *bangzi*, a genre of traditional Chinese opera, it is celebrated for the rich depictions of characters’ psychology and personalities, enhancing in the modern Chinese audience the impression that Greek culture is characterized by discussions of gender, emotions, and ethics.<sup>4</sup>

Theater performance of Hippolytus, too, reflects a reinterpretation of Euripides’s play in the modern context. To illustrate, the summary of a version of the National Theatre of Greece performed in the 2010s describes the play as an interwoven story of the misunderstanding between mortals and the punishment from immortals.<sup>5</sup> A Spanish production directed by Emilio del Valle, likewise, presents the tragedy as a struggle between men, that is, “the dilemmas between passion and logic, lawless love, oestrus and its tragic consequences.”<sup>6</sup> Others, to a greater extent, attribute the cause of the tragedy to Hippolytus alone, remarking that it is “that of being tied to an oath of silence that prevents him from saving his own life.”<sup>7</sup> Besides, adaptations have often portrayed goddesses not as unapproachable mysteries but instead as characters in possession of intense emotions, as mortals are. Though the performances, unlike *Medea*, are explicitly religious, the role of religion is typically considered as a bridge between men and deities, now portrayed as manlike. This notion can be observed in the production by a theater group named Actors of Dionysus, which depicted Aphrodite as a mortal servant in order to, as the production team believed, help the modern audience understand the original religious context.<sup>8</sup> However, as Aphrodite and Artemis acquire more human characteristics, the difference between the immortals and the mortals diminishes. What follows is the recognition of religion not as a belief, as the Athenians did, but as a natural constituent of the plot.

Apart from depicting marriage, sex, and revenge in a conventional way, modern adaptations of *Medea*, in particular, often address contemporary issues, among which is gender equality. In the early twentieth century, Harley Granville Barker published his translation of the tragedy in England and, through it, advocated women’s suffrage in a time when voices of opposition were prevalent.<sup>9</sup> In 1991, Tony Harrison’s version, *Medea: A Sex-*

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<sup>1</sup> “Medea,” National Theatre of Scotland, January 1, 2023, <https://www.nationaltheatrescotland.com/past-performances/medea>.

<sup>2</sup> “Medea,” @Sohoplace, November 18, 2022, <https://sohoplace.org/whats-on/medea>.

<sup>3</sup> “Deutsches Theater Berlin - Medea. Voices (Medea. Stimmen), by Christa Wolf,” accessed December 6, 2022, [https://www.deutschestheater.de/en/programme/a-z/medea\\_voices/](https://www.deutschestheater.de/en/programme/a-z/medea_voices/).

<sup>4</sup> Yuan Zhang, “Dadan de gouxiang, Chenggong de kuayue – shixi Hebei bangzi qupai zai Meidiya zhong de yunyong” 大胆的构想，成功的跨越——试析河北梆子曲牌在《美狄亚》中的运用 [Bold Conception, Successful Leap – An Analysis of the Use of Hebei Bangzi tunes in *Medea*], Zhongguo xiju wenxue xuehui 中国戏剧文学学会, July 30, 2022, <http://zgxjwxxh.cn/newsinfo/668862.html>.

<sup>5</sup> “Hippolytus,” National Theatre of Greece, July 16, 2014, <https://www.n-t.gr/en/events/oldevents/hippolitos>.

<sup>6</sup> “HIPPOLYTUS by Euripides,” International Festival of Ancient Greek Drama, May 24, 2019, <https://www.greekdramafest.com/hippolytus-by-euripides/>.

<sup>7</sup> “Hippolytus,” University of Coimbra, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://www.uc.pt/en/cech/research/general-project/thiasos-cultural-association/productions/hippolytus/>.

<sup>8</sup> J. Atkinson, “Hippolytus,” British Theatre Guide, August 3, 2020, <https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/hippolytus-rev>.

<sup>9</sup> Fiona Macintosh, Claire Kenward, and Tom Wrobel, *Medea, a Performance History*, EPUB (APGRD, 2016), 55, <http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/ebooks-medea>.

*War Opera*, depicted Medea as a heroine and Jason as a ferocious villain. The production presents women's predicament in the modern world from a new perspective, by emphasizing Medea's normality and Jason's insanity.<sup>10</sup> Evidently, the feminine role of Medea has become a subject of exploration throughout modern times and has obtained increasing attention amidst calls for women's rights.

Modern playwrights, in addition, appear to be especially fond of modifying *Medea* into a context of immigration and colonialism, drawing inspiration from Medea's foreign identity. Luis Aflaro's *Mojada, A Medea in Los Angeles*, for example, is centered on the issue of illegal female immigrants in the United States and expresses concerns for women's rights.<sup>11</sup> Other productions, including *The Hungry Woman, A Mexican Medea*<sup>12</sup>, *Além de Rio (Medea)*<sup>13</sup>, *Asie*<sup>14</sup> and *Demea*<sup>15</sup>, also put much emphasis on Medea's foreignness and use her as a colonial symbol. Set in different parts of the world—Mexico, Brazil, France, and South Africa—these plays all examine the status of women under colonialism while suffering racism. The ancient tragedy, in this way, has been employed as a means for rallying against discrimination and injustice, a theme that is entirely absent in the original production.

Modern literary comprehension of Greek plays resembles popular culture in many ways – it tends to underscore the theme of romance and sex but rarely discusses religion, which was presumably the core concern of the Athenian audience. This is evident in common online resources, which not only reflect the thoughts of popular audiences but may also shape how modern readers, specifically students, interpret the literature. For example, Wikipedia states that Euripides's *Medea* “exhibits the inner emotions of passion, love, and vengeance” and is “centered on Medea's calculated desire for revenge against her unfaithful husband,” which readily leads to the impression that the tragedy has little connection with religion.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, LitCharts summarizes the play into themes such as “exile”, “the roles of men and women”, “justice and natural law”, and “duty”, whereas religion or cults are not included.<sup>17</sup> In an article about *Hippolytus*, Wikipedia explains how the tragedy embodies “two aspects of the human spirit in conflict: one aspect is love...the second aspect is what the play refers to as *sophrosyne* [moderation]”, stressing human nature over the roles of the goddesses.<sup>18</sup> Britannica, too, only refers to the deities as the representation of “sexual passion” and its opposite, offering little description of its religious significance.<sup>19</sup>

The picture painted in scholarly understanding, unfortunately, is not so different. In the introduction of Oxford University Press's *Medea*, Michael Collier's statement that “As exotic as Medea is, she is still a woman; as unusual as her story is, it is nevertheless the story of a marriage.....” clearly shows that despite the abundance of other themes, sex and marriage are yet the most prominent characteristic of the Greek play accepted by some

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<sup>10</sup> Macintosh, Kenward, and Wrobel, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin Fainstein, “The World of the Play: ‘Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles,’” Portland Center Stage, accessed December 27, 2022, <https://www.pcs.org/features/the-world-of-the-play-mojada-a-medea-in-los-angeles>.

<sup>12</sup> “The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea,” Cherríe Moraga, accessed December 27, 2022, [https://cherrie-moraga.com/index.php?option=com\\_content](https://cherrie-moraga.com/index.php?option=com_content).

<sup>13</sup> Kathryn Boshier et al., “The Darkening of Medea,” *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Drama in the Americas*, October 1, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199661305.013.024>.

<sup>14</sup> Macintosh, Kenward, and Wrobel, 28.

<sup>15</sup> Macintosh, Kenward, and Wrobel, 19.

<sup>16</sup> “Medea (Play),” Wikipedia, December 16, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medea\\_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medea_(play)).

<sup>17</sup> “Medea Themes,” LitCharts, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/medea/themes>.

<sup>18</sup> “Hippolytus (Play),” Wikipedia, December 27, 2022, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolytus\\_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hippolytus_(play)).

<sup>19</sup> “Hippolytus,” Encyclopedia Britannica, December 2, 2011, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hippolytus-play-by-Euripides>.

modern scholars.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, *Hippolytus*'s introduction acknowledges that “*Hippolytus* contains the hard knowledge that life without religion is as impossible as life with it” and that “Religious power enters the play from two fountainheads, Aphrodite and Artemis, who appear high over the stage.”<sup>21</sup> Although the association of *Hippolytus* with religion is more observable than *Medea*, most scholars tend to believe that Euripides utilizes religion as a tool to exhibit “the characters’ inability to penetrate and understand each other’s inner lives”. In this way, religion is only what helps with the narration of the story, that “if in the manner of modern playwrights he did not have the gods as facilitators, we would be denied this play’s clairvoyance as to the reality of its characters’ inner lives.”<sup>22</sup> Such interpretation, nevertheless, does not explicitly accept the religious nature of the Greek plays. It views religion as a feature less significant when compared to themes of love and vengeance and denies it as the core of tragedies.

## The Historic Tradition

Paintings found on ancient Greek pots reveal that the religious nature of tragedies was widely accepted by the Athenian audience, contrary to the modern interpretation. In other words, the Athenians perceived plays such as *Medea* and *Hippolytus* not only as a form of art, as the modern audience does, but also as a representation of their religious belief. While tragedies observe human feelings of love and hatred, the celebration of the prominence of the gods perhaps played a larger role in ancient times. A scene from *Hippolytus* painted on an Apulian calyx-krater, dating back to approximately 330 B.C., displays the story in two separate registers.<sup>23</sup> On the upper level, a group of gods are seated in a relaxed manner: Aphrodite and Eros, the goddess and god of love and sex, Athena, the protector of Athens, and Hermes, who acts as the messenger of the divine world to the mortals. Underneath the gods are three human figures, who are likely Hippolytus, Phaedra, and the nurse. An almost identical layout is found on a volute-krater that dates back to around 340 B.C., the vase painting on which also separates the deities and humans into two levels, only that there are more figures.<sup>24</sup> The group of gods includes not only Aphrodite, Eros, and Athena, but also Poseidon, father of Theseus, and Apollo, who most likely replaces Artemis. The scene of the mortal world, however, is less peaceful than that of the previous depiction: Hippolytus, cursed by Poseidon and avenged by Aphrodite and Phaedra, struggles to control his chariots while the horses are terrified by the bull. A modern audience might expect to see Aphrodite and Poseidon reacting to Hippolytus’s imminent wound, but surprisingly this is not true. The gods above are having conversations, looking into each other’s eyes and paying little attention to the dramatic scene below. The indifference of the deities enhances the fact that the two levels are not at all connected—the gods are not concerned about human events and the suffering of mortals and, similarly, humans could hardly seek assistance from divinity. The paintings do not intend to show, nevertheless, that the gods are unrelated to Hippolytus’s tragedy. Quite contrarily, they display the gods as the driving force behind tragedies, that the gods simply exist and, except predetermining individuals’ fate, rarely intervene as the plot unfolds. Unlike modern interpretations, the theme of divinity departs from the plot itself and is represented as a reality that the Greeks acknowledged. It is essentially part of the religious life that the Greek playwright, the audience, and the vase-painter all led. The performance of tragedies

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<sup>20</sup> Euripides, *Medea (Greek Tragedy in New Translations)*, trans. Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer (Oxford University Press, 2006), 6.

<sup>21</sup> Euripides, *The Complete Euripides: Volume III: Hippolytos and Other Plays (Greek Tragedy in New Translations)*, trans. Peter Burian and Alan Shapiro (Oxford University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Euripides, *The Complete Euripides: Volume III: Hippolytos and Other Plays (Greek Tragedy in New Translations)*, 10–11.

<sup>23</sup> Oliver Taplin, *Pots and Plays: Interactions Between Tragedy and Greek Vase-Painting of the Fourth Century B.C.* (J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), 133–34.

<sup>24</sup> Taplin, 137–38.

and vase-paintings, apart from their literary and artistic values, are all genuine expressions of the Greek religious belief.

Occasionally, the gods portrayed on pots are not entirely associated with the scenes. For example, the depiction of Medea and her chariot, found on a Lucanian hydria in around 400 B.C., includes Aphrodite and Eros, who are not present in Euripides's *Medea*.<sup>25</sup> However, the presence of the two gods can easily be justified as they are more than appropriate for a story of sex and revenge. Another possible explanation is that the smaller figure could have been Erinyes, but this, too, can be understood as Erinyes representing Medea's fury. The two deities present, regardless of their actual identities, precisely show how religious the tragedy was perceived—in fact, their presence is quite unnecessary for viewers to understand the painting as part of Medea's story. It may be that the presence of the gods simply follows the Greek artistic tradition of depicting deities next to human figures in tragic scenes, but it must be acknowledged that the formation of such a tradition is inseparable from a highly religious culture.

Furthermore, there is evidence that Greek tragedies often relate to the establishment of cults—a fact that is almost entirely neglected by the modern audience but is meanwhile strikingly exhibited in *Medea*. A direct piece of evidence that the ancient Greeks did perform rites for Medea's children is from Pausanias's *Description of Greece*. Pausanias offers a description of the Corinthians' cult, that into the Well of Glauce “she threw herself in the belief that the water would be a cure for the drugs of Medea. Above this well has been built what is called the Odeum, beside which is the tomb of Medea's children. Their names were Mermerus and Pheres.....but as their death was violent and illegal, the young babies of the Corinthians were destroyed by them until.....yearly sacrifices were established in their honor and a figure of Terror was set up.”<sup>26</sup> By the time of Pausanias, that is, around second century B.C., there had already been the custom of making sacrifices for Medea's murdered children in order to protect the Corinthian children. Ancient vase paintings, then, strengthen this description by showing the Greek audience's fascination with Medea's mystical power. There is, for instance, an Apulian bell-krater from around 350 that depicts Creusa, daughter of Creon, being poisoned by Medea's gifts.<sup>27</sup> In the scene, Creusa is burning in her headdress and robe while those around her flee in terror. It is also notable that Erinyes hover above the figures, signifying Medea's furious revenge. The selection of this particular scene, instead of one that portrays Medea and Jason in conflict, probably suggests that people were obsessed with the magic power, or even wizardry, that Medea possesses. This idea becomes more convincing in scenes of Medea's chariot, which is often surrounded by snakes. The painting of one Lucanian calyx-krater even depicts Medea, on her golden chariot, in the center of a sun with rays of glorious light radiating outwards.<sup>28</sup> The colors are so dazzling that the painting naturally arouses the feeling of Medea's semi-divinity. At the same time, Jason appears to be weak and pathetic, a sharp contrast with Medea who is afloat in the air. Apparently, the depiction is intended to be a celebration of Medea's strength and holiness. The painter's intention can be further testified by a subtle yet crucial detail, that the corpses of the children are laid on an altar—which points to the establishment of a cult.

## Conclusion

In summary, the modern understanding of *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, tends to focus on themes of love, marriage, and sex. Modern adaptations of the plays, common online interpretations, and even scholarly works often conclude that the tragedies are in essence portrayals of rich human emotions. Though this commonly held notion

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<sup>25</sup> Taplin, 117–21.

<sup>26</sup> Pausanias, *Description of Greece, Volume I: Books 1-2 (Attica and Corinth)*, trans. W. Jones, Revised ed. (Harvard University Press, 1918), 1. 2.3.6-7.

<sup>27</sup> Taplin, 115-6.

<sup>28</sup> Taplin, 122-3.

does reflect some important themes in the plays, it fails to associate Euripides's plays with the Greek religious context. Vase paintings of ancient Greek pots, which provide an account of the interaction between the plays and the Athenians, suggest that religion plays a role that is generally neglected by the modern audience. Apart from being a significant theme, religion should also be recognized as an inherent part of the plays, that the ancient Greeks brought it from the theater to their real life—exemplified by the cult in *Medea*. While the context of Greek tragedies changes throughout different historical periods, it may be beneficial to redirect the modern audience's attention to religious themes in future performances of *Medea* and *Hippolytus*. Given the depiction of modern adaptations, one could infer that religion is often neglected in productions today because it is considered as less relevant to society — gender, on the other hand, is strongly relevant and is therefore stressed. This is not true, however. While religion itself is not always a primary concern, the intersection of gender and religion remains crucial for the modern audience. This can be seen in modern political debates — for instance, the clash between the Democrats and the Republicans on the issues of abortion and gay marriage — or in the dispute about whether religious people have the right to deny service to gay couples. A theatrical emphasis on religion and its connection to the more popular themes, presumably, would offer people a new perspective to examine present-day issues.

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