A Thesis
Entitled

Medea in Victorian Women’s Poetry

by
Mia Ursula Rodriguez

as partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the Bachelor of Arts Degree
with Honors
in
English

Thesis Director / Honors Advisor:_______________

Dr. Melissa Valiska Gregory

The University of Toledo

DECEMBER 2012
Abstract

During the mid to late Victorian period, Euripides’ tale of Medea was given new life by the suffragette movement. As Victorians began to question women’s rights and capabilities, Medea’s story resurfaced as a cautionary tale showing the damage that occurs when women repress and shape their identities to fit uncompromising social expectations for their gender. In this thesis, I examine two Victorian women poets who interpreted Medea as a feminist statement: Augusta Webster, whose “Medea in Athens” (1870) was featured as the lead dramatic monologue in her collection Portraits, and Amy Levy whose closet drama “Medea: A Dramatic Fragment” (1881) was published as a part of her collection A Minor Poet and Other Verse. Both these writers examine Medea’s psychology and the context in which she lives. Through their use of poetic conventions, Webster and Levy are able to suggest ways in which Medea’s autonomy and identity are co-opted by a patriarchal society. I argue that Webster uses the tactics of the dramatic monologue to explore Medea’s disintegrated sense of self, depicting her as a woman whose identity has been usurped by her husband’s view of her. Levy appropriates the techniques of closet drama to focus on the voice of a patriarchal culture that excludes Medea long before her act of filicide. Through close readings of these two poems, I show the cultural impact and relevancy of Webster and Levy as female voices in the Victorian literary tradition.
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Dr. Gregory for all her considerate and inspiring input, both on this project and as a professional. I could not have completed this project without the encouragement of Grace and her careful editing, or Matt and his coffee. Finally, I would like to thank my Mother, for everything.
# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements..................................................................................iii
Table of Contents......................................................................................iv
Introduction.................................................................................................1
Augusta Webster’s Medea In Athens.................................................................8
Amy Levy’s Medea: A Dramatic Fragment.......................................................23
Conclusion....................................................................................................38
Primary Works...............................................................................................41
Works Cited..................................................................................................41
Works Consulted............................................................................................42
Introduction

Greek mythology came alive in the nineteenth century’s collective cultural imagination, as society looked to ancient Greece for social and moral standards. Aspects of ancient Greek culture leaked into every day Victorian life. Evidence of this is found in the prolific translations of Greek texts from the Victorian time period. Augusta Webster (1837-1894) and Amy Levy (1861-1889) were two female poets who contributed to Victorian Hellenism through their interpretations of Euripedes’ myth Medea (431 B.C.). Webster was the first to publish her interpretation “Medea in Athens” (1870), followed by Levy with “Medea: A Dramatic Fragment” (1884). Webster and Levy worked with the skeleton of Euripides’ myth in order to relate Medea’s character to the cultural changes and challenges they were experiencing during their lifetimes. During the mid to late-nineteenth Century, Victorian society began to question women’s rights and capabilities. Webster and Levy used Medea to explore the ways in which rigid cultural expectations for a woman’s role in society, marriage, and motherhood can destroy a woman’s sense of self.

Both Webster and Levy challenged the limits of pre-established Victorian boundaries with their interpretations of Medea. The basis for their work is the Victorian tradition of Hellenism. Because the Greeks were so highly regarded by the Victorians,
Webster and Levy used Greek mythology in order to confront outdated convention. Concerning Victorian idealization of Greek culture, T.D. Olverson writes, “indeed it is remarkable how often Hellenism is described as an intense white light, illuminating the present from the recesses of history” (8). Though Victorian society as a whole was enamored with the Greeks, knowledge of Greek language was reserved for the educated, rather than the common citizen. Also further excluding Webster and Levy, education was reserved almost entirely for males. This left an elite class of educated males to interpret the majority of Greek literature and mythology for their era (Fiske, Heretical Hellenism 16). Because of this social structure, “women’s access to the classics were restricted in order to keep women out of the club, which was partly defined precisely by that exclusion; and women ambitious for literary accomplishment, just as naturally yearned to get in” (Olverson 10). Both Webster and Levy were discriminated against acceptance into an ongoing Victorian discussion of Greek mythology on the basis of their gender. As women, they were discouraged from pursuing academic or professional goals. They became minorities within their culture simply by inviting themselves into the literary world on a professional level. While their work was outside of cultural norm, it was not disregarded. Their translations helped to make knowledge of Greek culture available to popular society, and their interpretations related women’s rights to an already established cultural common ground.

Christine Sutphin argues that Webster and Levy’s feminist interpretation of Medea was accepted within Victorian culture precisely because it was based in Greek myth. While Victorians certainly admired the Greeks, they simultaneously regarded them with a fascination for the forbidden. A story set in Greek culture was considered exotic,
thus removing it from Victorian cultural norms. Medea’s character offers a striking contrast to the Victorian ideal of womanhood. Her status as a Greek mythological figure allowed her character to transcend restrictions Victorian society imposed on female thoughts and actions. Webster and Levy took advantage of Medea’s removal from Victorian limitations for feminine propriety. By using Medea to express frustration with an outdated patriarchal society, they were able to make social commentary while still working within the boundaries of socially-acceptable literature.

Webster and Levy read the original myth of Medea as the plight of a powerful woman trapped in a society that did not accept powerful women. In the beginning of her story, Medea must experience a secondary power vicariously through males such as her father and her husband Jason rather than holding an internal source of power. As historian Brad Levett observes, women were considered sub-citizens in Greek culture because it was believed that their natural weakness rendered them unable to control power and passions. Greek theory holds that females have little control over their output into the world. Their lack of control was believed to be rooted in their physical bodies, as their anatomy was more porous than males. Through these porous physiques leaked emotions, thoughts and actions. The Greeks believed that female weakness extended to allow not only output, but also less control over input. Therefore, women could be easily persuaded and manipulated. Medea fits the stereotype of easy manipulation in the beginning of Euripides’ play. She is weak, influenced by Jason to leave her home, destroy her family and follow him to Corinth. She shows unmanageable grief upon Jason’s desertion of her for second wife Glauce. In her grief, she becomes a threat to King Creon, Glauce’s father, who subsequently banishes her and her children. Medea’s
banishment is the turning point of the drama, after which the reader begins to see a strange gender role reversal. Medea begins to harden herself emotionally after she learns of her banishment by controlling her grief and setting her sights toward revenge. Her realization that she has been manipulated and rejected by Jason and society allows her to tap into a power source that has long been hidden under her adherence to a traditional female role. Medea’s recovered power source is decidedly masculine by both Greek and Victorian standards. Now, Medea is the one doing the manipulating. She uses what she has been taught by males about traditional gender roles to her advantage in order to wreak revenge on Jason.

Though Euripides’ tragedy has been historically interpreted as sympathetic to Medea’s plight, his focus is not on Medea’s psychology as in Webster and Levy’s versions. Even considering her perspective, an audience’s main deterrent in sympathizing with Medea is her act of filicide. Edith Hall documents a long history of social disgust for Medea’s filicide. Motherhood is revered in societies across time and space as a role of nurturing, loving support. The idea of a mother killing her children is horrific and was especially reviled in the Victorian era. Victorians held the traditional family structure dear to their hearts as the foundation of their moral society. Medea was so much abhorred during the eighteenth century that no playwright, director or actress could successfully portray her character as Euripides intended. Through the eighteenth century, Medea was played as a madwoman, an inhuman monster, or her filicide was left out of the performance altogether (Hall 49). However, Medea’s story proved too powerful to become lost in history. In 1856, the French playwright Ernest Legouve enjoyed huge success with his rendition of Medea. I believe this success was directly related to
Legouve’s intention “to explore Medea’s relevance to contemporary concerns” (Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism* 39) with his production. Legouve’s exploration was pertinent to the suffragette movement and cultural unrest over women’s rights, as can also be seen in Webster and Levy’s interpretations. In fact, ten separate adaptations of Euripides’ *Medea* were seen on the London stage between 1845 and 1907, making it one of the most popular Greek myths to be performed during those years (Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism* 24). Hall finds that “Medea came to the fore at almost exactly the same time as legislative activity surrounding divorce and the rights of married women” (Hall 50), a phenomenon that brings cultural relevancy to Webster and Levy’s interpretations. Medea’s sudden popularity contrasted sharply with the Victorian’s previous aversion to the myth, but correlated with widespread cultural questioning of women’s rights and role in society. As the suffragettes worked towards women’s rights, gender roles were not as cut and dry as they had previously been considered. Popular interest in Medea’s story was heightened as society began to realize that women were, in fact, capable of such things as murder and filicide. Though her filicide has never been condoned by society, a better understanding of Medea’s inner turmoil was created through Webster and Levy’s work. With this understanding, Suffragettes began to champion Medea as the victim of a patriarchal society.

Though Victorian society was accustomed to seeing *Medea* in theaters, Webster and Levy removed Medea’s story from the public stage. Their choice of genres facilitates their social commentary. Webster’s dramatic monologue and Levy’s closet drama each offer a unique set of tools with which to interpret Medea’s story, shaping the information the authors are able to provide for their readers. Though I will discuss the ways the
dramatic monologue and closet drama differ individually, I believe an exploration of the background these two forms share is crucial to understanding Medea’s story. Catherine B. Burroughs discusses these genres as forms of literature that were considered socially ‘safe’ for women writers in Victorian culture. In order to discuss a controversial topic, Webster and Levy chose forms that were inherently private. The privacy of these forms functions dually to provide intimacy for the readers both outside and inside the story. While the dramatic monologue and closet drama are meant to be read aloud, audiences would have been small gatherings of domestic women. In this more personal setting, women could discuss the implications of literature with no fear of public judgment. In such an atmosphere, according to scholar Shanyn Fiske, the closet drama—and the dramatic monologue that it comprehends—became a covert method of challenging boundaries imposed by traditional gender roles while experimenting with alternatives beyond the prescriptions of conventional morality. (50)

The privacy of these forms allowed their content to be outspoken and experimental. Literary forms in the public eye, such as theater, generated more censorship by their very nature. Webster and Levy’s content was certainly beyond convention. Within the storyline, their choices of form challenge gender roles by giving readers an intimate examination of Medea’s personal thoughts and life. It is central to Webster and Levy’s feminist agenda that Medea’s voice shows the consequences of her repression at the hands of a patriarchal society. The dramatic monologue and closet drama function to highlight the specific effects Medea’s autonomous identity has suffered due to her subjugation. Webster and Levy’s choices of genre do not demonstrate a lack of courage
or conviction on the part of the authors, as literary critic Matthew Brander has suggested. Rather, their choice of genres reminds the reader exactly how controversial their work was.
I. Augusta Webster’s “Medea in Athens”

As a woman, Webster was denied a formal education in Greek. She was self-taught, learning to translate by using resources that were provided for the males in her life such as her brother and her husband. Greek mythology clearly appealed to Webster. In 1866, she published a translation of *Prometheus*, and, in 1868, she translated Euripides’ version of *Medea*. Webster created a name for herself with her translation of *Medea*, which was well-received by scholars. She was praised by reviewers for the accuracy, clarity and inspiration with which she translated (Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism* 51). Webster originally published “Medea in Athens” as the first entry in a collection of monologues titled *Portraits* (1870). She stepped outside the boundaries of traditional female subject matter and ideology in this collection. Several of the monologues in *Portraits* feature outspoken women, perhaps the most commonly recognized of these being “A Castaway.” This monologue exemplifies the way in which Webster used the voices of unconventional women to express frustration with patriarchal societies throughout *Portraits*. As Fiske remarks, Webster “strongly believed that poetry, while maintaining its artistic integrity, could and must function as a social catalyst” (Fiske, *Augusta Webster* 471). Thus, her project with “A Castaway” was to humanize a prostitute by showing her internal emotions and the external influences leading to her life as an outcast. This poem was
intended to provoke her readers into recognizing that the woman’s “fall” from virtue was heavily influenced by social circumstances. Though placed in Webster’s time period rather than ancient Greece, “A Castaway” followed the tone and purpose set by “Medea in Athens.” Medea’s monologue was one of two Greek myths published in Portraits. The second was based in the myth of Circe, telling the tale from Circe’s viewpoint for the first time. Both myths show Webster moving beyond translation and into interpretation. Fiske notes that “Webster re-imagined the Greeks as a way to think through the problems and possibilities of a newly emergent female identity- one enclosed within the confines of a literary and social history erected by men’s thoughts and actions” (Fiske, Augusta Webster 470). The results of Webster’s re-imaginings are versions that are sympathetic to female characters’ perspectives by allowing their stories to be re-told by a female author. By exploring the possibilities of female perspective, Webster demonstrates to the reader how damaging the absence of a female voice can be under any circumstances.

In Webster’s “Medea in Athens,” Jason is a representation of the patriarchal society that re-shapes, oppresses and ultimately rejects Medea, thus destroying her personal identity beyond recovery. Webster successfully shows that at every point in Jason and Medea’s relationship, Medea is secondary to Jason’s primary power. After leaving Corinth, the couple embarks on a journey that is Jason’s, not Medea’s. They travel to Athens, a land of his choosing. Together they produce only sons, children who embody Jason in male heritage. Jason chooses when their relationship is over, and he allows Medea and his children to be outcast from their homeland. When Webster’s poem opens, the reader finds Medea safely in Athens and married to Aegeus. This creates a retrospective viewpoint in the monologue, one in which the reader sees characters and
events through Medea’s memories. As she begins to speak, the reader learns that Medea has just been given the news of Jason’s death. Because Webster writes in the dramatic monologue form, the reader is allowed to share in Medea’s private, uncensored thoughts about Jason’s death. By acting as an unseen listener, the reader catches Medea in an entirely intimate moment. Traditionally, the dramatic monologue form includes an internal auditor. Medea’s only internal auditor is a figment of her imagination: she conjures in her mind the ghost of Jason, whom she speaks to throughout the poem.

Webster uses the dramatic monologue to isolate Medea from outside influences. This enables the reader to focus on the ways Medea’s genuine, unobserved identity has been co-opted. Though Webster can suggest ways in which Medea may have been victimized in her portrait, the form of dramatic monologue does not allow Medea to be proven a victim conclusively because it leaves no room for outside evidence to support Medea’s voice. This allows Webster to explore the ways in which a woman’s personal identity can be taken from her through social structures such as marriage, without condoning Medea’s filicide.

As Medea speaks, the reader sees she persistently defines herself through Jason’s eyes. This suggests that Medea’s selfhood has been colonized by Jason; she cannot think about herself without imagining how he would think of her. Throughout her monologue, Medea is one moment loving and regretful and the next bitterly angry towards Jason and her perception of his vision of her. This is characteristic of the mental anguish she is experiencing. Medea is trapped between her dependence on Jason to define her identity and her desire to be free of his influence. This internal battle ultimately overpowers Medea, causing her to shut down her memories. In banishing Jason from her mind, she
also banishes any hope for independent rationalization of her past. With her refusal to face the past independently, Medea causes her autonomous identity to die with Jason. Webster traces Medea’s lost autonomous identity through the evolution of her relationship with Jason, showing how completely Medea’s identity has been compromised at each stage. She depicts the deconstruction of Medea’s identity as a gradual process that begins as soon as she marries Jason. Her loss of identity begins with physical dislocation of both body and space, and becomes a mental, emotional, and imaginative dislocation, ultimately morphing Medea into her present state.

Webster pinpoints the beginning of Medea’s lost identity to the moment Jason finds her as a young girl. Jason’s discovery initiates a sequence of events in which she is taken from her home and loses her virginity, two intimately physical changes which Jason controls. Webster shows Medea remembering her original home, where her sense of identity was powerful, and this memory contrasts with the current Medea whom Jason has created. Medea remembers herself before Jason arrived as naive and full of simple happiness, but the happiness is actually a powerful extension of her own identity. She describes herself as a young girl living a life of tranquility, who devoted most of her time to learning spells for healing rather than destruction and death. In Webster’s description, Medea finds meaning in using her powers for good. By using her power for joyful purposes, she sees joy reflected back at her:

. . . [E]ven lifeless things

seemed glad because of me; and I could smile
to every face, to everything, to trees,
to skies and waters, to the passing herds,
to the small thievish sparrows, to the grass
with sunshine in it, to the weed’s bold flowers:
for all things glad and harmless seemed my kin,
and all seemed glad and harmless in the world. (211-18)

This passage shows Medea participating as a fully realized individual in the world around her. She projects her “glad and harmless” mindset onto non-living objects, but this projection is not all-consuming. Rather, it is a sense of kinship that she shares with the world around her. There is no dominating role here, as in her relationship with Jason. The joy she experiences is shared by everyone and everything. She sees the beauty in every part of life, believing that nothing can harm her. Though Medea’s focus in this passage is the memory of happiness in a past life, her memory can be read as something far more sinister. Medea is so alienated from her identity that she has become estranged from herself in her own mind. Even when picturing herself as she was before Jason, Medea cannot see herself through her own eyes. She knows that faces smiled at her, and through their smiles she remembers being happy. In early life, she remembers smiling back in return. This description is distinctly different than Medea’s later version of herself, when she has been removed from her native home and physically displaced by Jason. Once Jason finds Medea, he persuades her to leave her home and aid him in his travels. One of Medea’s first acts under Jason’s guidance is to kill her brother while fleeing her father, causing her to lose her native land, home and family forever. From this moment, Medea is a foreigner. She has no home base, nowhere to belong that is her own. Jason has taken her intrinsic sense of belonging from her, leaving her only to belong to him.
Medea’s physical dislocation is more than a removal from her home. Webster also depicts it as a loss of identity stemming from the physical loss of her virginity. The poem describes the psychological, social, and sexual transformations accompanying marriage as a kind of predatory violence against the female self, beginning with the woman’s loss of virginity. Medea describes the change Jason wrought in her as physically invasive. “Oh smooth adder, who with fanged kisses changedst my natural blood to venom in me” (204-05). Relating this imagery to its biblical roots in the Garden of Eden shows that rather than representing Adam, Jason is the corruptor as a “smooth adder” who deceives Medea as Eve. In this warped representation of original sin, Webster makes bold social and religious commentary. According to Christian doctrine, Eve corrupts Adam through her weakness. In Webster’s version, the snake corrupts an innocent, well-meaning Eve. This highly sexualized imagery is not the only time Medea talks about Jason’s “kisses hot and strange” (221). By using the word “strange,” Webster makes it obvious that the physical love Jason offered Medea was entirely unknown to her. Once the poison of Jason’s snake bite has entered Medea’s body, it changes her so completely that the blood in her veins is altered. Blood running through veins is the physical force behind life, and so this change becomes the basis of her entire existence. It is important that Jason is the first man Medea has known sexually. Medea’s loss of virginity offers the reader insight to the state of her innocence upon meeting Jason, and shows how the bond between the couple was formed. Although Jason married Medea, Webster portrays marriage as a seduction and corruption of Medea’s soul, rather than a merging of two complete souls. The type of physical access Medea granted Jason could not be recreated or revoked. Loss of virginity is a permanent change, one which Jason
used to manipulate Medea. The reader sees this manipulation through Medea’s description of physical alteration in her bodily makeup after losing her virginity. Jason’s love ultimately destroys the agency and strong sense of identity present in the girl who one made the whole world smile back at her.

Into Medea’s smiling, innocent world, Jason brought obscene crimes and a passion which entranced Medea. She describes herself as passive, not an agent in these crimes, saying “the curse of thee compelled me” (222). It was a compulsion to follow Jason, a thing she had no will to resist. Jason captures Medea for himself by destroying her home, family, and invading her body. Once these physical changes have been wrought, Jason has Medea under his control. Through Jason’s physical control, he begins to alter Medea’s mental identity. She soon rearranges her needs, power, emotions and memories to revolve around Jason. Ultimately, Jason co-opts Medea’s identity so completely that she feels they have become one person. However, as with her loss of virginity, this is not a merging of two halves into a whole. Rather, the whole of Jason has consumed Medea. Jason retains his identity as a complete entity, while Medea is left with nothing. Webster shows this explicitly through Medea’s reaction to Jason’s death. Her life has become Jason’s, and because he has died it is nonsensical to her that she still lives. She grieves “but lo the man is dead: I am forgotten. / Forgotten; something goes from life in that-as if oneself had died” (169-70). This statement speaks powerfully to Medea’s loss of an autonomous identity. Because Jason’s memories of her are gone, she is completely forgotten, as though Jason is the only person in the world to have known her. Even further than being forgotten, she feels that she has died with his memories of her. This is more than natural grief in the loss of a partner because Medea is still very
much alive, though she considers herself to exist only in Jason’s memories. The reader understands that this is not true because Medea continues a life with a new husband in Athens. Many other people have memories of Medea, including Medea’s own memories of herself, but none of those memories are important to her.

Since Jason’s memories are the only ones that matter to Medea, she defines her own memories solely through Jason’s eyes. This allows her to mold the past to fit her need for Jason’s love by imagining Jason’s view of her as she wants him to see her. She convinces herself that her imaginings are truth, quickly suppressing any doubt of their accuracy. She knows Jason has hungered for her, for her love, and for the love of his lost children. Medea’s vision of herself through Jason’s eyes shows that Jason is the judge and jury of Medea’s person. She wants so desperately to please him that she has stopped thinking of herself in terms of her own wants and needs. Instead, she must picture herself as Jason would have seen her in order to feel desired and powerful. Medea’s inability to imagine herself as separate from Jason is particularly evident in the moment when she recalls their journey away from her home together; in this passage Medea pictures Jason picturing her:

I was afraid and careful, but she laughed:

‘Love steers’ she said: and when the rocks were far,
grey twinkling spots in distance, suddenly
her face grew white, and, looking back to them,
she said, ‘Oh love, a god has whispered me
‘twere well had we died there, for strange mad woes
are waiting for us in your Greece’: and then
she tossed her head back, while her brown hair streamed
gold in the wind and sun, and her face glowed
with daring beauty, ‘What of woes’, she cried,
‘if only they leave time for love enough?’ (58-70)

Here Medea remembers an important event in her life through Jason’s eyes. She imagines that Jason remembers her as reckless and proud in love for him. Medea’s passion and fearlessness were once her powers of attraction, but have become nothing more than tools for Jason’s use. Once again she has helped him to avoid death through her skill and fearless navigation. Her fearlessness was the key to Jason’s use for her, because Medea was willing to risk everything for him with no thought of her personal safety. She trusted in their love to keep them safe, and this trust made her bold. Webster shows the completeness and naiveté of Medea’s trust in Jason when Medea ignores warnings from the gods because she believes Jason’s love is more powerful. Medea brushes off the god’s warnings. She does not care what sorrow she must face as long as she still has Jason’s love. This emotional dependency places Medea’s happiness in Jason’s hands. She has no happiness within herself, relying on their love to bring her joy. A later Medea could see the folly of this trust, but in Webster’s version Medea chooses not to focus on that aspect of the memory. Instead, she focuses on the feelings of power and attractiveness she experienced through Jason’s eyes. Jason sees her as beautiful because of her daring attitude, which is caused by his love. The reader can infer that Jason is a narcissist, in love with the reflection of himself he sees in the Medea he created. In her memory, Medea is described by Jason as full of life, glowing and tossing back her hair in the wind. Within Jason’s memory of her, Medea imagines herself alive. Without his
vision, she cannot see herself; a phenomena causing the mental “death” Medea experiences since Jason’s vision no longer exists.

Medea’s memories function to show Jason’s continued control over her emotions and memories, as well as demonstrating the power of her need for Jason’s love. Her need for Jason to want her is so powerful that she creates fictional scenes in which she imagines Jason’s last moments on earth. Rather than picturing herself without him, Medea pictures Jason still needing her. This proves once again that Jason’s need for her has become the core of her being - necessary to her life. Medea imagines Jason pining for her, full of regret up until his last moment on earth. He calls out to her to heal him, realizing her prophecy for their relationship was true. As he dies, his last thought is of her wisdom and rightness, and his last wish is that she was there with him. He is full of self loathing for his actions, taking full responsibility for his ruined life. He is not angry, but wishes that she would have taken pity on him by sparing them. If they were alive, he could have their comfort during his time of need, and the knowledge that they would carry on his legacy. But he never says that their deaths are Medea’s fault, rather saying “I schemed amiss / And earned the curses the gods send to fools” (88-89). When Medea does allow herself to express guilt for her actions, it is because she was not available to Jason when he needed her during his death. Even though it was Jason who cast her aside, she imagines that he believed her unfaithful in her love. In his imaginary time of need, he entrusts a bird “fly forth, fly forth, bird, fly to fierce Medea” (112), and tells the bird that if Medea truly loved him she would be with him even after all they have been through. Because she is happy with a new husband and imaginary sons while he is in need, she “breaks oaths more than I broke” (117). This shows Medea’s servant mentality in her
relationship with Jason. Even after he has rejected her service, she feels guilty for not serving him.

A servant mentality underlies everything Medea imagines about Jason. The portrayal of Medea as a servant to Jason can be read as Webster’s commentary on a marital institution in which wives vowed to obey their husbands “until death do us part.” Webster took this concept to the extreme by portraying Medea as Jason’s servant even after death. She questions what can happen when wives are lead to do bad things in the obedience of bad husbands. In Medea’s presentation of Jason’s love and thoughts about herself versus his new wife Glauce, the reader sees that Medea is aware of Jason’s shallowness. His regret is not because of his love for Medea, but because Medea’s love would have furthered his needs better than Glauce’s. It is clear that Medea realizes she is an “other,” a woman outside of standards for acceptable femininity. She has been society’s outcast long before she came to Athens. Even in her imagination, she understands that Glauce represents the beauty and essence of femininity by society’s standards. While Medea describes herself with bold, passionate words, she describes Glauce in muted terms. Glauce is fair with “milk white softness” (82), but Jason realizes that Glauce’s softness would have bored him. While she can get him ahead politically, she could not have offered him the life of excitement and adventure that Medea could. “Medea would have made me what I would; / Glauce but what she could” (87-88).

Medea’s strong will and the strength of her love for Jason allowed her to “serve [with] strength next divine” (86), while Glauce was simply born into a position of power that could further him. Medea creates and conquers; Glauce is entirely passive. Medea puts her characteristically-male strength in a positive light during her imaginings, but the
reality of Jason’s choice between the two women tells the reader that Medea’s masculine traits and foreignness have been rejected rather than treasured. Even in her imaginings, Medea recognizes that she is Jason’s servant, not his equal partner. She may create and conquer, but she does so only at his request. She imagines Jason’s regret that he did not use her to her full potential, but she cannot go so far as to picture Jason’s regret for hurting her. The idea that Jason could feel that kind of regret simply does not exist in Medea’s mind. This shows the reader the truth of their relationship, one in which Medea gave and Jason received. In a bitter moment, Medea accusses Jason of taking advantage of her, saying that she was “put aside like some slight purchased slave / who pleased thee and then tired thee” (240-41). After Jason had taken everything he needed from Medea, he cast aside a woman who was no longer useful to him.

The truth of her relationship is too painful for Medea to face, thus causing her to create a dying Jason who still needs her and regrets leaving her for Glauce. Once she creates this Jason, she becomes sentimental over his death. She succumbs to “the touch / Of ancient memories and the woman’s trick / Of easy weeping” (150-51). Her emotions are still connected to Jason: when she allows herself to believe he was sentimental over their lost love, she also can become sentimental. However, as soon as she begins crying she quickly snaps back to reality. In the denial of her tears, she also denies her femininity by calling her weeping a “woman’s trick.” This can be related to Euripides’s version of Medea in which Medea is at first uncontrollable and weak in her grief but gradually controls herself, hardening her emotions and setting her sights towards revenge. Webster’s version is a coda to Euripides’s; therefore Medea has already fortified herself against womanly signs of grief during “Medea in Athens”. The most irreversible and life-
altering of Medea’s fortifications is her filicide. Since Jason is in possession of Medea’s identity, she must regain control of her own identity in order to become independent after he no longer needs her. She has already lost her marriage and subsequently Jason’s love, which was her only connection to her sexuality, attraction and feminine powers. With filicide, she denies the last of the gender roles which have allowed Jason to co-opt her identity for his own use. Medea’s denial of her femininity is violent and horrific, but she believes it to be necessary. She does not realize that Jason has altered her identity permanently. She cannot regain her identity, for Jason has formed her with experiences she cannot forget. The most unforgettable of these experiences is filicide itself, which haunts her even as she attempts to refuse its memory.

After she forces herself to stop weeping, Medea is resolved to feel no pity for Jason. She wishes Jason were still alive only so that her revenge could continue to affect him, a sentiment which contrasts sharply with her emotional and mental dependence on him. Medea’s refocus on revenge brings the subject of her dead children to the surface of her thoughts. As Medea begins to confront the memory of her children, it becomes clear to the reader that she has murdered at personal loss to gain revenge. Filicide is at the heart of her need for her revenge on Jason to continue. Melissa Valiska Gregory sees Medea’s filicide as key to the permanence of her lost identity. Gregory interprets “Medea in Athens” as Webster’s search for a way to discuss “the transformative effects of maternal feeling” (33), citing Medea’s failed struggle to resolve the memories of her filicide as “a complex instance of a late-Victorian woman writer’s efforts to acknowledge the profound, life-changing potential of motherhood without succumbing to traditional nineteenth century maternal ideology or diminishing the impact of her fierce critique of a
gendered social system” (34). By severing her ties to motherhood, Medea opts out of one of society’s most traditionally valued roles. However, Medea’s denial of her role as a mother goes further than societal pressure. Medea also uses filicide to sever her physical ties to Jason. The children were the result of Medea and Jason’s union, the product of Jason’s “kisses hot and strange” (221). To rid herself of Jason, Medea felt forced to destroy the living evidence of him she found in her sons. Medea vows “never could I forgive thee for my boys” (245), blaming Jason for the murders just as he blamed himself in her imagination. She cannot look at her hand, which murdered her children, without hating Jason. This is a mindset of self preservation, one that is fitting in light of Jason’s physical and mental colonization. Medea sees Jason when she looks at herself, therefore her hand is his and so the blame must be his as well. Without Jason to blame for her actions, Medea would have to own them. This placement of blame ultimately entraps Medea. She cannot recreate an independent identity because doing so would force her to accept responsibility for filicide. Medea’s last words are a testament to the connection between her filicide and Jason’s continued colonization of her identity. In a desperate final attempt to escape Jason’s posthumous physical, mental and emotional hold on her, Medea banishes him from her thoughts:

Go, go; thou mind’st me of our sons;
And then I hate thee worse; go to the grave
By which none weeps. I have forgotten thee. (290-92)

Medea can no longer rationalize her choice to commit filicide now that Jason’s revenge has been completed by his death. Neither can she accept that Jason has permanently altered her identity, for such acceptance would show that Jason can still affect her. Since
she cannot resolve her memories without placing the blame for them on Jason, she denies them. In her denial, she destroys any hope of creating an identity that has not been defined by Jason. This paradox is an internal struggle impossible to resolve, and so Medea chooses to ignore it by sending Jason to the grave. Subsequently, she sends her memories of their life together to the grave as well. These memories hold her life, for she cannot define herself except through Jason’s eyes. By forgetting Jason, she hopes to forget her children but inadvertently forgets herself, giving her lost identity the permanence of death.
II. Amy Levy’s “Medea: A Dramatic Fragment”

Exploring Levy’s work can give modern readers valuable information about what it meant to be an educated, untraditional female in the nineteenth century. Unlike Webster, Levy was never connected to traditional female roles such as wife or mother. She chose her education and career over a family, a choice which was nearly unavoidable due to her academic goals and their repercussions in Victorian society. Because of this, Levy felt a foreignness and exclusion from the majority of Victorian society, and this sense of exclusion is worth discovering in her work. She created literature that reflected her experiences as a minority (Bristow). The two Greek myths included in her volume titled *A Minor Poet* (1893) are exemplary of this type of literature. Following in Webster’s footsteps, Levy chose to re-write Greek myths from the heroine’s perspective. Both Xantippe and Medea were traditionally considered hopeless, unlikeable characters. Levy redeems these characters in her interpretations by examining the influences which cause them to be categorized as unlikeable. Rather than relying on the male viewpoint of these heroines, Levy explores the perspectives of the heroines themselves. “Xantippe” is a dramatic monologue from Socrates’ wife’s point of view. It shows Socrates’ exclusion of his wife from the intellectual atmosphere surrounding the couple. Xantippe longs to be included in her husband’s thoughts, but he refuses to admit her into intellectual
discussions because she is a woman. This leaves her deeply dissatisfied and unfulfilled. “Medea” is the second myth included in *A Minor Poet*. Levy’s challenge in re-writing “Medea” was to give her readers a different perspective on Webster’s recent interpretation. Levy’s choice of literary form accomplishes this goal by giving both the writer and reader new perspective and information concerning Medea’s story. Levy steps outside of the dramatic monologue form used by Webster, writing her version of the myth as a closet drama. The closet drama is more closely related to Euripides’ “Medea,” allowing Levy to correlate her interpretation with Euripides’ original characters and setting. Levy’s form differs from Webster’s dramatic monologue most significantly by allowing Levy to include voices of the characters surrounding Medea. Levy uses these character’s voices to give the reader information about Medea’s alienation and mistreatment. To facilitate the closet drama’s inclusion of outside characters, Levy places Medea still inside the city of Corinth. While Webster portrays Medea after she has already committed the murders and fled the city, using Medea’s isolation to show her status as an outsider, Levy’s story begins before Medea is aware of Jason’s treachery. By placing Medea inside the city, Levy creates two important perspective changes for the reader. First, she emphasizes Medea’s alienation in the city through her foreignness in relation to the other characters. Second, her readers are invited to sympathize with Medea when they see other character’s treatment of her firsthand. Webster’s portrayal of Medea is limited by a one-sided version of events, in which the reader is never sure how much of Medea’s story is truth and how much is an attempt to justify herself. Levy makes her adaptation powerful by allowing the reader to see events unfold for themselves. This provides a context for the reader to react to Medea based on their own interpretation of
events, rather than receiving her story secondhand through her potentially biased interpretation of her life.

Levy’s closet drama establishes Medea as a character oppressed by a patriarchal society by using each character’s voice in a unique way. Four character’s voices are heard within the drama. Two character voices are the male townspeople, Nikias and Aegeus. The townspeople are Levy’s version of the Greek chorus, and they function as a chorus by providing commentary on the action of Jason and Medea. The townspeople’s voices are emphasized more than Medea’s own voice, showing the way the people of Corinth twist and degrade Medea’s identity. They transform her internal sense of self through their view of her. The third voice is Jason, whose role as a representative of the patriarchal society in Corinth had already been established by Webster at the time Levy was writing. Though Jason’s character has a voice, he is never given a chance to explain himself. The reader does not hear his inner thoughts, and he does not converse with any character other than Medea. The reasoning behind his decisions is explained through the townspeople and his conversation with Medea, not through his own mind. This turns Jason into an impenetrable force as a character. Though Medea is categorized as inhuman by the townspeople, through Levy’s writing Jason becomes the one who is not human. As the fourth voice in Levy’s drama, Medea is the only character to give the reader her internal viewpoint with soliloquies. She has been rejected and treated as an animal in Corinth, but as the only character that opens up to the reader, she is given a chance to redeem herself. This works towards establishing her humanity, for through the soliloquies at the beginning and end of her story the reader sees Medea’s desires, inner turmoil and
ultimately her destruction. Most importantly, the reader sees Medea’s loss of identity very clearly through her soliloquies.

In her opening soliloquy Medea expresses her longing to please the townspeople, which stems from a desire to please Jason. She does not know how to belong, but is eager to learn. She implores “Will ye not give a little of your love / To me that am so hungry?” (49-50), showing her yearning for human understanding. Medea portrays herself as a humble servant, begging the Corinthians to teach her how to become one of them. She is “ready to do their bidding” (38), however the Corinthians are unyielding in their hatred for her. During this soliloquy, Medea is still attempting to fit the Corinthian mold though she understands it is impossible. The difference lies in her genetic makeup, represented in her thoughts as red Colchian blood:

    And in their hands, I, that did know myself
    Ere now, a creature in whose veins ran blood
    Redder, more rapid, than flows round most hearts,
    Do seem a creature reft of life and soul. (29-33)

Here, Medea speaks about her red blood for the first time, relating it to her identity. When her blood ran rapidly, she was self-aware. Now it seems that she is lifeless, or without blood. Medea is aware that her red blood is gone, and with it her life and soul. She knows she is an alien in the city of Corinth, thinking back on days before she came to the city as a time she was happier and still had “pride and hope” (4). In those days she had an internal sense of identity, though she has lost it at the hands of the Corinthians. In contrast to her rapidly flowing blood, she describes the Corinthians as “Marble-cold and
smooth / As modeled marble” (25-26). This statuesque description shows the physical and emotional impassivity of the Corinthians.

Because Levy positions Medea still inside the city of Corinth, the reader is able to see the drastic contrasts between Medea and the townspeople outlined in her opening soliloquy. Though the townspeople are bystanders to the action unfolding between Jason and Medea, their voice is the most powerful within the drama. They play an active role in the feelings of isolation Medea expresses during her soliloquies. The reader learns to be skeptical of the townspeople’s voice early in the drama, when Nikias, the character who is most hostile towards Medea, exclaims “I’d sooner speak, for my part, fair than true” (201). These words twist all his subsequent speeches, because the listener can never be sure if he is being honest or convincing. The citizens of Corinth are unsympathetic and judgmental towards Medea. Aegeus can offer an opposing viewpoint to Nikias but he is quickly shot down and easily swayed. Through the townspeople’s eyes, the reader sees Medea’s foreignness turned into a threat. They alienate her by speaking in terms of her physical identity, as Nikias says “I like not your swart skins and purple hair; / Your black fierce eyes where the brows meet across” (69-70). He later contrasts this image with the “gold hair, lithe limbs and gracious smiles” (78) of a woman whom he approves. Aegeus deems Medea “fair enough” (68), but after Nikias speaks he agrees that she is “something strange” (76). They call Medea strange and alien on several occasions, but this is not their worst treatment of her. Throughout the drama, Medea is referred to in animalistic terms. Nikias says she “tis but a very tiger” (75), and after her filicide “a swift and subtle tigress” (290). It is apparent that the townspeople are uncomfortable with Medea, and so they reject her.
While they categorize her as sub-human with animal descriptions and constant remarks on her strangeness, Nikias and Aegeus are lured by Medea’s animal magnetism. They do not acknowledge this attraction, but it is apparent in their descriptions of her, which carry sexual undertones. Her differentness is erotic in a way they cannot categorize, and so they are deeply disturbed by it. Their attraction to Medea is linked to the power they feel over her. Medea depicts herself as a servant to the Corinthians in her opening soliloquy, which shows she acknowledges the townspeople as her superiors. This gives the townspeople the role of master or owner in Medea’s slave mentality. In their sexualized descriptions of Medea, the townspeople use race as an excuse to satisfy their need for erotic power and dominance over a woman. Signifying their level of attraction when observing her, Nikias and Aegeus constantly use the word “erect” when describing Medea’s figure and their reaction to it:

…when yonder Colchian

Fixes me with her strange and sudden gaze

Each hair upon my body stands erect! (72-74)

Nikias and Aegeus de-humanize Medea, referring to her by race instead of her name. Their use of sexual innuendo when describing Medea turns her into a sex object, separating her even further from being a human in their eyes. Medea’s gaze is “strange and sudden” to them because they fail to understand her, and so they find her unpredictable. Medea watches the townspeople because she wishes to become one of them, but succeeds only in scaring them. Their fear of her characterizes the phrasing of their attraction. Aegeus declares “She is a pregnant horror” (221), connecting her femininity and sexuality with terror. This “strange” attraction underlies all of Nikias and
Aegeus’s judgments about Medea. It is the root of their over-emphasized disgust for her, which becomes reactionary since they do not want to admit their attraction to a woman they consider beneath them.

In order to show the external judgment, criticism and publicity that Medea faced every day while living in the city of Corinth, Levy uses the townspeople to describe important events within the drama. Rather than hearing Medea’s voice describing events that have occurred in her own life, the audience hears the townspeople speaking for her. This emphasizes the townspeople’s control over her life. When the reader is introduced to Nikias and Aegeus, they are speaking in the street about Jason’s decision to leave Medea. She overhears them from her threshold, and in this way Medea learns her fate from the townspeople rather than Jason. This serves to show the publicity of Medea’s humiliation. Jason cannot reach her before the gossip does, and so she learns the entire city knows he has left her before she hears of it. The town is blatantly supportive of Jason’s choice, as Nikias says “I, in this thing, do hold our Jason wise; / Kreon is mighty; Glauke very fair” (66-67). This statement alienates Medea by approving of Jason’s decision to outcast her and recognizes that Jason belongs to Corinth with the use of “our”.

During Jason and Medea’s confrontation over his decision to leave her, Nikias and Aegeus listen in. Jason knows that his argument with Medea has an audience. This is his first thought when Medea confronts him, showing his eternal need for public approval. Jason’s preoccupation with public perception shows the control that the citizens of Corinth have over him. He desires their approval, and because they disapprove of Medea and applaud his union with Glauke, he will choose Glauke over Medea. Jason
does not think of Medea’s heartache or pain. Rather, he immediately commands her to move into the privacy of the house:

Your looks are wild, Medea; you bring shame
Upon this house, that stand with hair unbound
Beyond the threshold. Get you in the house. (90-92)

However, Medea will not go inside. She realizes she has become a problem for Jason. Jason wants her to leave quietly and be quickly forgotten, but Medea refuses to be swept under the rug. This marks Medea’s first act of disobedience to Jason and Corinth. She knows she has the attention of Corinth, and she uses her audience to her advantage during her revenge. Her actions are meant to shock the public and visibly debase Jason, just as he has publicly humiliated her. Jason wishes to disassociate himself from Medea. However, the townspeople connect Jason to Medea by noticing his “strange and subtle strength” (208). This strange strength accounts for Medea’s attraction to Jason. It gives him the magnetic pull he needs to capture the heart of a woman as wild as Medea. The strangeness likens him to Medea’s strangeness, foreshadowing that Jason will never be able to disconnect himself from Medea in the eyes of the public. Though they are both set apart as “strange”, Jason’s strangeness is statuesque and sets him above the rest of the townspeople while Medea’s is animalistic and allows the townspeople to discriminate against her.

Over and over, Nikias and Aegeus portray Jason as a model citizen and man. As he walks towards Medea, he is described as “striding through the streets / Gods! What a gracious presence” (83-84). Nikias’ description of prefect feminine beauty matches his description of Jason: “how firm his lithe, straight limbs; / How high his gold-curled head,
crisp like a girl’s” (202-03). Jason is “very strong” (207) and wise. Their remarks show them to be enamored by Jason. He is ideal: his girlishness is in his beauty, his manliness in his strength. In fact, Jason is such a model of perfection that he becomes statuesque. Imagery of Jason as a statue is particularly apparent when Nikias and Aegeus describe Jason and Medea’s initial confrontation. They cannot stop voicing Jason’s obvious hatred for Medea, emphasizing that Jason never loses control as Medea does. He is described as speaking “low and smooth” (117). Nikias remarks “And in the icy drooping of his lids / (more than his words, tho’ they are harsh enough), / Tells me he hates her” (120-23). His facial features are constantly stony “Mark you his white cheeks and knitted brows / What wrath and hate and scorn upon his face!” (162-63). Again, as Nikias describes Jason’s reaction to finding his children murdered: “His face was whiter than the dead’s” (402). The image of Jason as a statue works in three ways. First, it shows the harshness in his person- a person made of stone. He makes unyielding, commandeering decisions in which others’ needs are secondary to his own. Second, the depiction of Jason as a living statue illuminates the attitudes of the townspeople towards him. It sets him apart as an admired, untouchable piece of art. Statues are erected to commemorate and remember men. Jason is set apart as a living man in such a way. Third, Medea’s description of the townspeople as “marble-cold and smooth” (25) matched with Nikias and Aegeus’ description of Jason’s “white cheeks” (162) plants Jason firmly among the citizens of Corinth. This connection is important because it leaves Medea entirely alone within the city. However, though Medea’s red Colchian blood alienates her from the cold Corinthians, Medea also becomes statuesque as the drama progresses. Medea’s transformation into stone is achieved by her revenge. At the time of the murders, Medea
has become stone, just as Jason and the Corinthians have been through their entire
treatment of her. Because she is a female, her actions are abhorred while the men’s are
deemed wise. Once she has become as cold as the Corinthians and Jason through
revenge, her internal sense of identity is completely destroyed. In the beginning of the
drama, Jason disdainfully calls her “A thing of moods and passions” (167). Yet, when
Nikias describes her as she commits filicide, she is “Calm as a carven image” (356). This
connection shows her transformation explicitly.

When Medea confronts Jason after learning he has left her, her natural passion
takes over. This passion is what the city of Corinth fears, and Jason reviles, because it is
the thing that makes her alien to them. She reminds Jason that though he is strong, her
strength has saved them countless times in their travels. But Jason denies her, saying he has

\[
\ldots \text{been caught}
\]
\[
\text{In the close meshes of the magic web}
\]
\[
\text{Wrought by your hand, dark-thoughted sorceress.” (113-15)}
\]

In this exchange, the reader sees that Jason rejects Medea just as the townspeople have.
Since he has no more use for her, he now categorizes her powers as dark and evil even
though she once helped him. Medea is also aware of Jason’s rejection. She knows she has
lost everything once Jason denies her:

\[
\text{I have poured the sap}
\]
\[
\text{Of all my being, my life’s very life,}
\]
\[
\text{Before a thankless godhead; and am grown}
\]
\[
\text{No woman but a monster. (139-42).}
\]
With this lamentation, Medea shows a perverted sense of self awareness by recognizing that she has become a monster. Though she is aware that she is a monster, she also knows that the monster is not her true self. She does not know her true self, as she asserted earlier in the drama. With recognition that she has become a monster, Medea shows that she has begun to see herself as the Corinthians see her. This is the key to her ability to perform revenge, for as in Webster’s version, Medea’s internal sight has been transformed. She can no longer see herself through her own eyes, only the eyes of the townspeople whose opinion of her has been controlling her actions and view of herself for so long. Though, like Webster, Levy’s Medea can never restore her internal identity, she is conscious she has lost this identity.

Jason patronizes Medea, saying that if she would only control herself, she would see the advantages of his actions. And so, in her last act of obedience, Medea brings herself under control. Her mad fury is contained, and her vision set. Here the reader sees Medea’s awakening and transformation:

Ah, Jason, Pause.

You never knew Medea. You forget,

Because so long she bends the knee to you,

She was not born to serfdom.

I have knelt

Too long before you. I have stood too long

Suppliant before this people. (253-58)

This is a breakthrough moment, in which Medea casts off the subjugation she has experienced while she was with Jason. In response to his command to control her
emotions, she tells him that he can no longer dictate her actions. She will control herself, but her control will come at a terrible price. Jason does not remember what she is capable of because she has been his servant for so long. In this moment, Medea metaphorically throws off her chains and rises from kneeling to Jason and the Corinthians. These stone-like people have dominated her for so long, creating her servant mentality through their sub-human treatment of her. Now that Jason has disowned her, she is freed from the suppression of the Corinthians and promises a horror. She is 

. . . lifted up into an awful realm,

Where is nor love, not pity, nor remorse,

Nor dread, but only purpose. (270-72)

She knows she has given the sap of her being to a man who was only using her for personal gain. Once a strong, beautiful woman, she relinquished herself, body and soul, to Jason. She came to him a woman and leaves a monster. Her calmness is more dangerous than her passion, for as her passion leaves so does her humanity. She has lost her sense of human love, pity, remorse and dread, leaving only thoughts of revenge.

Medea’s revenge is the second event described by Nikias and Aegeus. Allowing Nikias, a witness, to describe the murders to Aegeus further connects Medea’s violence to her treatment in Corinth. By taking this description out of Medea’s hands, Levy shows her lack of power during these events. Male voices describe her most horrific moment, suggesting victimhood rather than responsibility for her actions. This takes away the immediate violence of her murders, but also makes them more horrible by leaving details to the imagination. Nikias says “then all her face grew alien” (368) in describing the moment just before she kills her sons, connecting the murders to her alienation and
otherness. Aegeus condemns Medea, refusing to acknowledge her as a human being by first calling the deed evil, then Medea herself evil:

O evil deed! O essence of all evil
Stealing the shape of a woman! (385-86)

In his denunciation, Aegeus shows how quickly the townspeople are able to categorize Medea as evil. She is not a person to them, rather she is something wicked and alien that pretends to be one of them. These connections show the harshness of the townspeople’s attitudes towards Medea. Even as they describe truly horrific events, their biased viewpoint leaks through. Nikias questions Medea’s motherhood as he describes the murders to Aegeus, saying that he has always known she did not love her children with true motherly love. As proof of this, he tells Aegeus that one day he observed Medea and noticed that instead of watching her children play in a happy manner, she stared at them “with her swart brows knit / And fierce eyes fixed” (316-17) and picked up her child “stirred by some strange passion; then the boy / Cried out with terror, and Medea wept” (327-29). This story given as proof of Medea’s inhumanity instead proves the arbitrariness of the townspeople’s mistrust for Medea. Because of a day that Nikias observed her with no context, he believed her to be an unloving mother. The fact that Medea wept, a sign of human distress, does nothing to sway Nikias’ opinion of the scene. Under such scrutiny, Medea’s “strangeness” would always be interpreted negatively. The townspeople’s voices show that Medea has become a product of her environment. With her in-human acts of revenge, she is merely acting the way she has been treated since she came to Corinth.
Once she has committed the murders, Medea flees from the city. The reader finds her alone, finally away from the audience of Corinth. In this ending soliloquy, Medea no longer holds hope for acceptance. The city has rejected her, and with their rejection she has finally become as inhuman as they believed her to be. She is weary, saying “here let me rest; beyond men’s eyes, beyond / The city’s hissing hate” (461-62). She still feels the hatred of the city and Jason, even though she has vowed not to care what they think of her any longer. Medea remembers “a dream of one who strove and wept and yearned for love in a fair city” (469-70). She has awoken from the dream and finds there is nothing left inside with which to awaken. She is empty and so “Darker too / Grows the deep night within” (475-76). She has “fought with the fates” (478-79), as it was her fate to be born a female and Colchian. In her desire to become socially acceptable, she lost her sense of internal identity completely. She realizes this, but knows that it is now too late to change her fate. The red Colchian blood she speaks of in her opening speech is “drain’d and flows no more” (489). Her heart is shattered “against a rock” (488), and she can no longer weep. Devoid of every emotion and all identity, she has finally become a stone-like being. She does not weep, as Nikias faulted her for doing when he observed her with her children. The rock she has shattered her heart against is the cold white marble of the Corinthians, with Jason as their leader. By rejecting her, the Corinthians have finally transformed Medea into one of their own. They will never see her transformation, and Medea will never be given the acceptance she longed for. Her final lines “Thus I go forth / Into the deep, dense heart of the night – alone” (491-92), give Medea no hope for life after Jason.
A reader familiar with Euripides’ version of Medea is aware that Aegeus is Medea’s future husband, though Levy gives no direct indication of their eventual union. The strongest indication of Aegeus and Medea’s future are his half-hearted attempts to defend her against Nikias. However, his ultimate judgment that she is evil can hardly be interpreted as the sentiment of a future spouse. By leaving out Medea’s escape and future, Levy rewrites Medea’s story with no hope for redemption. Perhaps she did not wish to connect herself to Webster’s work, for with no Athens and second life for Medea to escape to; “Medea in Athens” also does not exist. I interpret Levy’s exclusion of Medea’s future as a wish to show the finality of her lost identity. Medea has been so completely, monstrously transformed by the Corinthians and Jason that she is no longer fit for human company. She must face the night alone, for as in Webster’s version, her identity has become so distorted that she does not consider herself a living person anymore.
Conclusion

Webster and Levy’s interpretations give us insight into Medea’s timeless ability to captivate readers. Through their work, readers are able to see beyond the facts of the story, into the psyche of Medea’s character. We are fascinated by Medea’s story because we recognize her humanity even while we would rather explain her actions by categorizing her as inhuman. Dominica Radulescu, author of *Sisters of Medea*, identifies Medea’s character as both Vernant’s “aitios” (in Greek: at fault, guilty, culpable, accused) and the plaything of the gods–both responsible for her fate and its victim. She has made choices of her own, manifesting her free will, but she is also the victim of Eros, of her father’s rage, of Jason’s unexpected change of plans, and of Creon’s fear of her. (102)

Medea is the product of a patriarchal society that allows male voices to be heard more loudly than her own. However, she has also chosen her response to these male voices. Though Webster and Levy suggest ways in which Medea is a victim, she cannot be wholly innocent. Neither is she conclusively guilty. Many aspects of her life have been taken out of her control, and much has been determined by males. As a result, we can observe her victimhood while we simultaneously identify her culpability. Medea’s life as
a mixture of fate and choice defines her as a human and connects her with humanity as a whole. I believe this dichotomy is the reason we feel an attraction to her character. Recognizing Medea’s complexity gives us an understanding of Medea which we can relate to our own human experience when we draw upon the mixture of choice and fate that has created our stories. We are then able to place ourselves within Medea’s story, wondering what role we would play in such a tale. Our human identification with Medea is the key to her enduring cultural presence.

Medea continues to be staged and interpreted today. Professor Helene P. Foley notes a resurgence of Greek tragedy performances in the late twentieth century. She believes that Greek tragedies continue to attract us because, as seen through Webster and Levy’s work, they give us the ability to comment on current social issues in a way that is simultaneously removed from our immediate culture. They also offer endless possibilities for adaptation. For example, Foley discusses Japanese director Yukio Ninagawa’s use of an all male cast in his adaptation of Medea, which was performed in the United States in 1989. The cast was meant “to exploit with particular effectiveness and self-consciousness the division in Medea between mother and vengeful hero” (Foley 8-9). Ninagawa emphasizes the duality of Medea’s character through an exploration of two roles that compete within her person. He interprets these roles as gender based: female versus male. Ninagawa has discovered the riddle inherent to Medea’s character. She is a mixture of fate and choice, female and male, mother and vengeful hero. Such a complex character will always leave room for new discoveries and interpretations.

Today, Medea’s story continues to be adapted into modern culture as a feminist statement. One such interpretation is the aptly titled “Medea Project”, which uses art as
social activism through the creation of performance pieces. This group provides support and acceptance for women who have traditionally been labeled social outcasts.

Originally, the program worked with incarcerated women in order to counter the sense of guilt, failure and cultural rejection that is specific to female inmates and contributes directly to recidivism. Since it began, the Medea Project has also expanded to include a circle for HIV positive women, with a mission of “sharing the Truth and releasing the stigma of what it means to be female and living with the virus” (Jones). The project’s blog “Deep in The Night” includes original pieces of writing from HIV positive women who struggle with the oppression and judgment they have experienced in their cultures. These women also work to take back ownership of their bodies and sexuality. This project embodies the spirit of Medea by giving women a voice with which to tell their own stories, rather than allowing their voices to be lost in the stigma of their experiences.

The Medea Project exemplifies our human identification with Medea’s character, through the women who are able to share their unique stories in this project. As shown by Webster and Levy, Medea can never be tucked neatly into a single category. Her complexities continue to intrigue audiences, writers, directors and performers. Her character evolves with our cultural needs, making her an enduring tragic heroine.
Primary Works


Works Cited


Gregory, Melissa Valiska. “Augusta Webster Writing Motherhood in the Dramatic


**Works Consulted**


