

Essay Practice – Section B

In Euripides' Play, how important is it that Medea is a foreigner, not a Greek woman?

This essay shall explore the aspects as to why it is important that Medea is a foreign woman or a 'barbaroi' (literally means that foreign people had a different language and the Greeks didn't understand them, they heard bar-bar-bar which is where the word 'barbaroi' came from) in a Greek society in Corinth. This means that the following aspects will be taken into account when deciding whether Medea is an important figure when she is foreign: the issue of being foreign in Greek society and how this would make Medea and others view her; also, the fact that she is a woman in Greek society and how important that she is a foreign woman rather than a man; the effect and views that she has on the audience as a 'barbaroi'; and that, if she wasn't foreign then would this, at all, change the way things happened in the play. This will take into account the fact that there are different morals, Medea as a character and her reaction to killing her children, but also the reaction from different characters in the Medea such as the chorus. Medea is from the island of Colchis and she helped Jason get the Golden Fleece, she risked her life for him, and left her home to go with Jason. She killed her brother to stop him from following them. She then got married to Jason and bore him 2 children, they lived a happy life in Corinth, because they were banished from Iolcus due to Medea killing Pelias. The main role of women in Greek society was to look after the home and take orders from men, Medea is not like this.

Medea was a foreigner and this is vital to the overall plot in the play. Without her being a foreigner the play would not work properly as there would be no contrast to the way Medea viewed Greek society. Medea does not know the full extent of Greek morals and this is shown throughout the play. Medea is still counted as an outsider by everyone, even the chorus look at Medea in a different light than if she was a true Greek woman. Medea is a Princess however and this shows that she has a higher social standing than a foreign slave woman brought back from war such as Cassandra from the Agamemnon. Slaves had no respect and they are to take orders from their master or mistress. Medea is above this level but is still not respected by the Corinthians. A Greek woman of a high social standing is expected to look after the household and make slaves do all the work for them. Medea did have people under her such as the Nurse and Tutor who were both slaves. They were very supportive of Medea and these characters and the Chorus say "Poor Medea" through a lot of the play, they pity her, even though she is foreign. The Chorus say that they "are all on her side" showing that they did not think of her wrongly. However, Medea thinks herself as alone and an exile so there is no one for her to turn to. Jason was the one who brought her to his home country and he did not teach her all the Greek morals and neither did the Corinthian women, this is very significant because this means that Medea is shown as a barbaroi as she does not understand what she did was wrong. Her children were innocent bodies that should not have been slain in her anger against Jason who had made her suffer. It is important that she is foreign because it means that she has a different standing to Jason and revenge is a major theme in showing her aggression against him. Aegeus views Medea as a life support to him getting children and so by giving her hospitality he feels an obligation to her, in spite of her being foreign he supports Medea fully. The most important issue that supports Medea's actions is the murder of her sons and even though she told herself to spare her children she still went through the evil-minded plot. Medea thinks wrongly of herself, but the fact that she brought up a Greek moral of revenge is important. Jason does not care

about Medea at all as all he wants is royal standing and this is what Medea cannot provide for him, as she is foreign. The messenger calls her "unholy" which supports the idea that she is foreign. Medea should be foreign rather than Greek because it shows a different social standing, and brings about different twists and turns in the play.

The next issue is that of Medea being a woman in Greek society. Women in Greek society are supposed to follow the orders of the men above them, look after their household and bare children. It is important that women do this because men take care of politics and make the decisions in society and the home. Many women do this unless they are courtesans (prostitutes that were free to do what they pleased). Women were property of their fathers until marriage and after that of their husbands. This means that men could do what they pleased with a woman. However, Medea is a totally different kind of woman and is not true to type as she is a woman that makes her own decisions. She doesn't listen to Jason, she is possessed by the furies and the anger against Jason getting another wife. She looks at the morals literally and women aren't supposed to do this, they are quiet beings who take orders, but they do have to understand the morals fully. Medea doesn't fully understand the morals, she picks and chooses the ones she wants to use, for example revenge and xenia. Women play a very minor part in society and should not go about killing people out of pure anger against their husbands. It was legal for men to choose another wife, although, it is quite rare to not find pleasure in the first wife they have. She says that though she killed her children she loved them very dearly and life had been cruel to her. She is a murderess and she is not deeply regarded for this as Jason thinks of her as a "sick murderess". The Greeks feel that the murder of an innocent is against the will of Zeus. Medea treats the situation not as a woman, but as a man. With Agamemnon, however, there is a man involved whereas here Medea alone made her own decision. This shows that Medea is not a true woman at all.

Medea as a foreign woman has a very deep effect on the audience. The audience see it in the eyes of the Chorus. This allows them to see the change in emotion in Medea's character from a very sad and despaired woman who doesn't know where to turn to a woman full of fury and revenge set in her mind. This shows that the audience can see her character develop. This would scare a 5th Century Athenian man because he would be afraid of what his wife might do to him. The audience would really sympathise with Medea at the start but as the play progresses and they see the change in her they would begin to think that she shouldn't kill her children. The chorus sum the feelings for Medea in three simple words "cursed, miserable woman" and this would be agreed by the audience as well. Medea was foreign and this may make the audience think that she was not a protagonist in the play. This play goes against everything that usually happens as a man is normally the tragic hero in a tragedy, this play does not have a tragic hero and also doesn't fit the "perfect tragedy" because there is no catharsis or anagnorisis in this play. The role of Medea is a lot different from the ones that a Greek man would think of a woman, and also mean that Medea scares them because of her powers to do things to men. She is a foreign woman and she had the power to do what she wanted to do to people, she would scare the audience and make them despise her for what she does to her children.

If Medea was a Greek this would change the play dramatically as she would play a different role. She would be a true woman in the eyes of all the audience and characters. If Jason were to take up a new wife then Medea would still feel angry towards Jason and maybe kill the children, but, the chorus would know Medea and trust her so meaning that they could have persuaded her out of killing her children. However, Jason probably

would have never re-married because Medea is a princess and this would give him royal standing already so he would be satisfied with where he was and Medea would not have killed her sons at all. However, this would mean that there would be no play at all and that is pointless. The Medea would be different but this would make the play much less effective than it is. Medea is different in every way, she is an exile and nothing can change the play's outcome. Medea is a murderess who killed her own children, she slaughtered her children and had caused much wrongdoing. Medea cannot work with her as a Greek princess because it would change the entire play, and there might not even be a play. Medea needs to be foreign, nothing can change the play.

In conclusion, it is very important that Medea is a foreign woman not a Greek woman because it brings forward the contrast between the ways foreign barbaroi views the world compared to a Greek woman. Medea views herself as an exile and she has left her home to be with Jason. She is not regarded as important to the Corinthians as a Greek woman. This means that she is overlooked and this is important because no one can persuade her against what she wants to do as she is a foreigner with different morals and makes her own decisions. Even before the play starts she decides that she must kill her brother and Pelios so that she is in more control. She is not a woman true to type because she takes matters into her own hands and interprets the Greek morals in the way of a man. Others view her as an outsider and Medea can see that she isn't thought of well, especially when she becomes a "sick murderess". Medea is a woman that would scare an audience full of men as she is foreign and acts like a man in many ways, they didn't know if his wife was going to do the same thing. If Medea wasn't a foreigner then the play wouldn't work and there wouldn't be a play at all. This means that she must be a foreign woman not a Greek woman because she brings a good, different element to the play, "and such is the conclusion to this" essay.