

# **MEDEA: heroine?**

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**1. Ideas of hero –cult:** celebrity, seasonal, sacrifices/offerings, tombs (Mycenaean-era re-use), power to hurt or help.  
See Nagy *Best of the Achaeans*.

## 2. Medea and heroization –suggestive evidence

cf. Sarah Hitch (CHS site): <https://chs.harvard.edu/CHS/article/display/5009>

[1.1. Hero Cult in the *Argonautica*]

“The possibility of heroization, both in terms of a blessed afterlife and as cult honors among the living, is made conspicuous for the external audience throughout the journey of the Argo in numerous descriptions of life after death. In the “Catalogue of Heroes,” Caeneus’ living descent under the earth is the subject of epic song (κλείουσιν ᾠοῖδοί ‘poets tell’, 1.59–64) and Theseus cannot join the crew because he is held under the earth (1.101–104).[14] The apotheosis of Herakles is explicitly explained to the Argonauts, a paradigm for heroization after long struggles for the Argonauts themselves (1.1315–1320).[15] The prominence given to Orpheus in the “Catalogue of Heroes” and throughout the poem as a sort of religious leader, although never explicitly associated with his famous *katabasis*, is a tantalizing allusion to his widespread cult status and associations with life after death.[16] **Further examples of blessed afterlives are demonstrated to the external audience in Hera’s prediction of the marriage of Achilles {135|136} and Medea in the Elysian Fields, the traditional abode of the blessed (4.811–815), and the narrator’s references to Ganymede (3.115–117) and the failed attempt of Thetis to immortalize Achilles (4.869–880).[17]”**

ApRhod 4.807-816 (3<sup>rd</sup> c BC)( Hera to Thetis)

I invited all the gods together to the wedding feast and with my own hands raised the marriage torch, in return for that kindhearted respect of yours. But come, let me tell you an unerring account: **when your son comes to the Elysian field**—he whom the Naiads are now tending in the dwelling of Cheiron the Centaur, though he longs for your milk—**it is his fate to be the husband of Aeetes’ daughter Medea**. So, as her mother-in-law, help your daughter-in-law, and Peleus himself as well.

.....θεοὺς δ' εἰς δαῖτα κάλεσσα  
πάντας ὁμῶς· αὐτὴ δὲ σέλας χεῖρεσσιν ἀνέσχον  
νυμφίδιον, κείνης ἀγανόφρονος εἵνεκα τιμῆς. 810  
ἀλλ' ἄγε καὶ τινά τοι νημερτέα μῦθον ἐνίψω.  
εὗτ' ἂν ἐς Ἥλύσιον πεδίον τεὸς υἱὸς ἴκηται,  
ὄν δὴ νῦν Χείρωνος ἐν ἤθεσι Κενταύροιο  
νηιάδες κομέουσι τεοῦ λίπτοντα γάλακτος,  
χρειῶ μιν κούρης πόσιν ἔμμεναι Αἰήταο 815  
Μηδείης· σὺ δ' ἄρηγε νυῶ ἐκυρή περ ἐοῦσα,  
ἠδ' αὐτῷ Πηληϊ.

### **3. Cult of Medea's children**

(see Corinne PACHE, *Baby and Child Heroes in Ancient Greece*)

- Medea kills them//  
Corinthians do it (in other versions)
- Medea promises cult in Euripides

Euripides *Medea* 1377-1388

**Jason**

Give up those dead to me, to bury and lament.

**Medea**

Never! I will bury them myself with this very hand. I will bear them to the sacred precinct of the goddess Hera Akraia [“of the Heights”], |**1380** so none of their foes may treat them with *hubris* by pulling down their tombs. And in this land of Sisyphus I will order for the future a solemn feast and rituals [*telos* pl.] to atone for this impious murder. As for me, I am going to the land of Erekhtheus, to dwell with Aegeus, |**1385** Pandion’s son. But you, *kakos*, will die a *kakōs* death, as is appropriate, your head crushed by a shattered fragment of the Argo, having seen the bitter coming to *telos* of my marriage.

ἐγὼ, φησίν, περιποιήσω αὐτοῖς πάνδημον ἑορτὴν ἐν ἣ πανηγυρίσουσιν οἱ Κορίνθιοι. θύουσι δὲ αὐτοῖς καὶ Ἀργεῖοι κατὰ χρησμόν.  
λιμωξάντων Κορινθίων ἔχρησεν ὁ θεὸς τιμῆσαι τοὺς τῆς Μηδείας παῖδας. ἐγὼ οὖν, φησί, περιποιήσω αὐτοῖς πάνδημον ἑορτὴν.

I, she says, shall establish a city festival in their honor in which the Corinthians will celebrate them. And the Argives too sacrifice to them in accordance with the oracle.

Since the Corinthians were suffering from a famine, the god ordained them to honor the children of Medea. I, therefore, she says, shall establish a city festival in their honor.

—schol. Euripides, *Medea* 1382

Added evidence on children's cult:

Philostratus *Heroikos* 53.4

Vinedresser. That's the right attitude! Since you are willing, listen: what the Corinthians do to commemorate Melicertes (for these are the ones I meant by Sisyphus' descendants), **and what they also do for the children of Medea, whom they killed to avenge Glauke, are similar to a dirge that is mystical and ecstatic: Medea's children they attempt to appease, Melicertes they praise.**

ΑΜΠ. Ὑγιαίνεις, ξένε, οὕτω γινώσκων, καὶ ἐπειδὴ βούλει, ἄκουε· τὰ μὲν γὰρ Κορινθίων ἐπὶ Μελικέρτῃ (τούτους γὰρ δὴ τοὺς ἀπὸ Σισύφου εἶπον), καὶ ὅποσα οἱ αὐτοὶ δρῶσιν ἐπὶ τοῖς τῆς Μηδείας παισίν, οὓς ὑπὲρ τῆς Γλαύκης ἀπέκτειναν, θρήνῳ εἵκασται τελεστικῶν τε καὶ ἐνθέῳ· τοὺς μὲν γὰρ **μειλίσσονται**, τὸν δὲ ὕμνοῦσιν.

Pausanias [on Corinth: 2.3.6] As you go along another road from the market-place, which leads to Sicyon, you can see on the right of the road a temple and bronze image of Apollo, and a little farther on a well called the Well of Glauce. **Into this they say 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 (Music Hall), beside which is the tomb of Medea's children.** Their names were Mermerus and Pheres, and they are said to have **been stoned to death by the Corinthians** owing to the gifts which legend says they brought to Glauce.

[2.3.7] But as their death was violent and illegal, **the young babies of the Corinthians were destroyed by them** until, at the command of the oracle, **yearly sacrifices** were established in their honor and a figure of Terror was set up. This figure still exists, being the likeness of a woman frightful to look upon but after Corinth was laid waste by the Romans and the old Corinthians were wiped out, the new settlers **broke the custom of offering those sacrifices to the sons of Medea, nor do their children cut their hair for them or wear black clothes.**

#### 4. Other involvement of Medea in cult:

Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 2. 13. 11 :

"Jason was king in Korinthos, and Medea, as her children were born, carried each to the sanctuary of Hera and concealed them, **doing so in the belief that so they would be immortal.**"

*Suidas s.v. Aix* (trans. *Suda On Line*) (Byzantine Greek lexicon C10th A.D.) :

"A proverb : 'The nanny-goat giving the knife.' For as the Korinthians were sacrificing to Hera Akraia, [**whose cult**] **Medea is said to have established**, the mercenaries hiding the knife in the nearby earth claimed that they had forgotten it. But the goat dug it up with her feet."

Αἶξ, αἰγός. καὶ παροιμία: Ἡ αἶξ δοῦσα τὴν μάχαιραν. Κορινθίων γὰρ Ἦρα Ἀκραία θυόντων, ἣν λέγεται ἰδρῦσαι Μήδειαν, οἱ ἐν τῇ παρόχῳ μεμισθωμένοι γῆ κρύψαντες τὴν μάχαιραν ἐσκήπτοντο ἐπιλελησθαι. ἡ δὲ αἶξ αὐτὴν τοῖς ποσὶν ἀνεσκάλευσεν.

Μηδείας μέμνηται ὅτι ἐν Κορίνθῳ κατώκει καὶ ἔπαυσε Κορινθίους λιμῶ κατεχομένους θύσασα Δήμητρι καὶ νύμφαις Λημνίαις. ἐκεῖ δὲ αὐτῆς ὁ Ζεὺς ἠράσθη, οὐκ ἐπέιθετο δὲ ἢ Μήδεια τὸν τῆς Ἥρας ἐκκλίνουσα χόλον. διὸ καὶ Ἥρα ὑπέσχετο αὐτῇ ἀθανάτους ποιῆσαι τοὺς παῖδας. ἀποθανόντας δὲ τούτους τιμῶσι Κορίνθιοι καοῦντες μιξοβαρβάρους.

He remembers Medea when she lived in Corinth and brought an end to the famine overcoming the Corinthians by sacrificing to Demeter and the Lemnian nymphs. Then, Zeus fell in love with her, but he did not win Medea over since she wanted to avoid the anger of Hera. Because of this, Hera promised her that she would make her children immortal. The Corinthians honor them after their deaths, calling them semibarbarians.

—schol. Pindar, *Olympian* 13.74 (Drachmann 1.373–74)

Μηδεία δὲ παῖδας μὲν γίνεσθαι, τὸ δὲ αἰεὶ τικτόμενον κατακρύπτειν, αὐτὸ ἔς τὸ ἱερόν φέρουσαν τῆς Ἥρας, κατακρύπτειν δὲ ἀθανάτους ἔσεσθαι νομίζουσαν· τέλος δὲ αὐτὴν τε μαθεῖν ὡς ἡμαρτήκοι τῆς ἐλπίδος καὶ ἅμα ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰάσονος φωραθεῖσαν—οὐ γὰρ αὐτὸν ἔχειν δεομένη συγγνώμην, ἀποπλέοντα δὲ ἔς Ἴωλκὸν οἴχεσθαι—, τούτων δὲ ἔνεκα ἀπελθεῖν καὶ Μήδειαν παραδοῦσαν Σισύφῳ τὴν ἀρχήν.

[They say that] when children were born by Medea, she always concealed the newborn, bringing him to the sanctuary of Hera, thinking that the concealing would make them immortal. Finally she learned that her hope was in vain, and at the same time she was detected by Jason. And he refused to forgive her when she begged, and he sailed away to Iolcus, and because of these events, Medea too went away and handed over the rule to Sisyphos.

—Eumelos fr. 5 (Bernabé) = Pausanias 2.3.11

Like Brelich, I take *katakryptein* to refer to hiding and concealing in an initiatory context. Segregation of an initiatory nature is sometimes understood as concealment (as in the Spartan *krypteia*).<sup>68</sup> This motif of concealing is also reminiscent of myths of attempted immortalization of human children by “concealing” them in the fire.<sup>69</sup> Just like Demeter with Baby Demophon and Thetis with Baby Achilles, Medea attempts—and spectacularly fails—to make her children immortal.<sup>70</sup> In all these myths, the emphasis is on a failed attempt to change the status of mortal children. Yet the mythical failure can also be understood in terms of a successful change of status in ritual terms and a mythical death can very well translate into a successful initiation.

One interesting element of the ritual in honor of the children is the number seven. There is a parallel in Pausanias’s description of a Sikyonian ritual involving seven boys and seven girls.<sup>71</sup> Pausanias describes a sanctuary of Persuasion (*Peithō*) that stands in the agora of Sikyon. The cult of Persuasion started when Apollo and Artemis came to Aigialeia (the ancient name of Sikyon) to seek purification after they killed the Python in Delphi. They were struck with dread in a place now named Fear (*Phobon*) and turned aside toward Karmanor in Crete. A plague (*nosos*) came upon the people of Aigialeia. Seers ordered them to propitiate Apollo and Artemis, and they sent seven boys and seven girls as...

## QUESTIONS:

1. Does the drama *Medea* (431 BCE) in any scene or overall hint at *Medea's* status as it might have been understood in cult?
2. In what other ways might *Medea* be considered a “heroine”?
3. How might *Medea's* cult status have influenced an Athenian audience's viewing of the tragedy?

### Further reading:

Jennifer Larson, *Greek Heroine Cults*. Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1995.

Deborah Lyons, *Gender and Immortality: Heroines in Ancient Greek Myth and Cult*. Princeton University Press, 1997.