

# MEDEA

## STUDY GUIDE



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DEPARTMENTS OF THEATRE & DANCE  
2009

## THE STORY OF MEDEA

In the astonishing period between 500 and 400 B. C. E. Euripides wrote Medea. Even today, it is among the most timely and shocking of the 31 plays extant from this rich period of theatre's beginning. In the original story, Medea is a superhuman character, obsessively driven by her anger toward Jason. How dare Jason reject her to marry the younger Cruesa?

Of course, Euripides's audience knew Medea's story. They recalled that Medea assists Jason in the securing of the legendary golden fleece – even going so far as to murder her own brother and renounce her homeland forever. Now, Jason rejects Medea to pursue his own romantic and professional interests.

In Euripides's original story and our adaptation, Medea struggles against a world of male dominance. She is an outsider. Sadly, her horrific murder of her own son to revenge herself on Jason mirrors contemporary headlines. We hope that your experience with the play will allow you to reflect on large questions that confront our society.

We see the story unfold through Medea's eyes – but her choices raise extremely difficult questions. How will Medea's actions change the community? How does one make a distinction between justice and vengeance? What can we learn as a result of Medea and Jason's tragic choices?

## CLASSIC MEDEA VS. MODERN ADAPTATION

SETTING: CORINTH, GREECE. OURS, APPALACHIA SOUTH.

### KEY EVENTS IN EURIPIDES' ORIGINAL VERSION

Medea is angered by Jason's decision to marry young Cruesa – daughter of Creon,  
King of Corinth

Medea comforted and questioned by the three Women of Corinth

Medea seeks asylum from King Ageus

Medea murders her two young boys

Medea leaves a tormented Jason in a flying Chariot, empowered by grandfather,  
the Sun god

### OUR VERSION

Medea has murdered her father to protect and support Jason

Medea is angered by Jason's decision to marry young Carissa, daughter of the  
Mayor of the Community

Medea is comforted and questioned by her friend Agnes

Medea seeks escape in Aarson's helicopter

Medea murders her teenage son, Talus

### DIALOGUE CONTRASTS

ORIGINAL: *Up, then, Medea, spare not the secrets of thy art in plotting and  
devising; on to the danger. Now comes a struggle needing  
courage. Dost see what thou art suffering?*

ADAPTATION: *I'm going downhill fast, aren't I?*

## MEDEA & THE TRADITION OF APPALACHIAN GRANNY MAGIC

In the play, Medea appears to practice a form of Appalachian Granny Magic. Appalachian Granny Magic is a combination of folk remedies, faith healing, superstitions, and storytelling handed down by generations of families in the Appalachian Mountains.

This folklore is termed “Granny” from the prominent role played by older women in mountain communities. This role is well-described by John Campbell in *The Southern Highlander and His Homeland*:

There is something magnificent in many of the older women with their stern theology – part mysticism, part fatalism – and their deep understanding of life. ... “Granny” – and one may be a grandmother young in the mountains – if she has survived the labor and tribulation of her younger days, has gained a freedom and a place of irresponsible authority in the home hardly rivaled by the men of the family. ... Though superstitious she has a fund of common sense, and she is a shrewd judge of character. In sickness she is the first to be consulted, for she is generally something of an herb doctor, and her advice is sought by the young people of half the countryside in all things from a love affair to putting a new web in the loom.

Appalachian Granny Magic is more visible than ever in contemporary North American culture. However, the tradition is very old, dating all the way back to the first settlers of the Appalachian Mountains. In the 1700s immigrants brought their Irish and Scottish traditions. Those two traditions were then blended with the local traditions of the Cherokee Indian and another, new belief system was born. Incorporating the faerie mythology of the Irish with the spirits of the natives and the symbolism of the church, Appalachian Granny Magic wasn't quite a religion, not quite a secular practice. Magic and religion and practical concerns became one path, out of which many skilled midwives and herbalists and lay preachers were created. Despite the long history of the tradition, there is very little information available. It is known to be an earth-based tradition passed on by Scottish, Irish and Cherokee ancestors. Nature is sacred in this culture. The Appalachian witch respects and reveres nature; however, she does not worship it.

## HOW DID THE ISOLATION OF THE APPALACHIAN REGION INFLUENCE THEIR CULTURE?



Blue Ridge, NC

Appalachia is a region extending from Mississippi to New York and includes eleven states within its official boundaries. The population of Appalachia is chiefly descended from Scottish and Irish immigrants who came to Appalachia to escape persecution and to find a better life. They brought with them a collection of superstitious beliefs, strong religious principals, and an emphasis on the family unit as the core of society. It is the rocky, inaccessible terrain of the Appalachian Mountains which gave rise to the isolation of the communities that existed within the region and lead to the cultural deviance from “normal” society. The lack of significant cultural or commercial linkages that existed with other societies, particularly prior to the Industrial Revolution, lead to the creation of a unique culture often seen as backward and old-fashioned. Due to the lack of a significant influx of different people, Appalachia was allowed to develop its own very distinctive culture.

The mountaineers owned and farmed their own land, creating very self-sufficient family units that did not rely on outside economy for the most part. This self-sufficiency contributed to both the isolation of the region, and to the high level of poverty. When problems arose, individuals turned to their families for solutions. Collecting and making remedies themselves was both more convenient and less expensive. The family preserved the knowledge of what is supposed to work for each ailment and as new things were tried and proved successful, new remedies would be passed on to the next generation.

## MYSTERIES OF THE APPALACHIAN GRANNY MAGIC CULTURE

Appalachian Granny Magic was passed on from parents to their children for many generations and usually was not passed outside of the family. The Appalachian communities were small, rural and secluded, so the customs, wisdom, and practices were not as often lost, forgotten, or modernized. Because of this, many of the ancient Irish or Scottish songs, rhymes, dances, spells, and rituals were more accurately preserved in Appalachia than in most other places in the world. Many of the Scot/Irish traditions, as well as the Cherokee traditions, have been carried on in Appalachia up to this day.

Most Appalachian witches believe that all people have a spirit; that all things of the earth have a spirit. They believe that spirits are a part of nature but not a part of the energy of god; they do not believe in many gods and goddesses as separate entities, they believe in one universal GOD. Appalachian witches observe the sabbats, solstices and equinoxes, but do not relate them to mythology; it is the seasonal changes that they recognize.

Divination is popular in Appalachia. Many of the witches read Tarot, and regular playing cards, tea leaves, coffee grounds, spider webs and clouds. Scrying in water, dirt, or sand is common.

Appalachian magic was a solitary practice. It required little preparation and no expensive tools or specialized knowledge. It was very practical and down-to-earth; eclectic and informal in its approach, rather than 'High' or 'Ritualistic' in nature. It was primarily concerned with omens, curses, cures, and protection. Ritual clothing was generally not used, and circles were not cast. All nature was believed to be sacred, so a "sacred" place did not have to be created; Appalachian witches believe magic need not be ritualistic to be effective because magic is essentially prayer. Some modern Appalachian witches, being eclectic already with Scottish, Irish, and Cherokee roots, have started to use some other traditions practices such as wearing ritual clothing and casting a circle.



Jason and Medea by John William Waterhouse

**DID YOU KNOW?**  
**SPELLS, REMEDIES AND BELIEFS OF THE PEOPLE**  
**IN THE APPALACHIAN MOUNTAINS**

If you dream of a birth, there will be a death and vice versa.

If your ears are burning, someone is talking about you.

A horseshoe aimed upward, nailed to a barn or house, will protect from evil and bad luck.

A raven that nests on the roof is an omen that a death will occur. To undo this omen you must scare away the ravens before they leave on their own.

Black birds that come to rest on a windowsill are a bad omen. If it caws while it is there the omen means a death.

If a bird flies into the house it is bad luck. Finding a dead bird is also considered a bad omen.

Dried basil hung over the doorways, windows, fireplaces will keep 'haints' from entering.

Squeaky doors are invitations to 'haints'.

Placing a fern or ivy on the porch will protect against curses. If it's eaten by an animal, then a curse is already in place.

Carrying a piece from a tree that has been struck by lightning will protect the carrier.

Acorns thrown on the roof before it rains will prevent hail damage. Oak logs burned in the hearth will protect the home.

Pine and cedar logs burned in the hearth bring prosperity.

A white dove flying over your house is an omen that there will be a marriage; some believe it is generally a good omen.

To rid your self of a wart, cut a potato in half and rub on the wart.

## SOME QUESTIONS TO THINKING ON AFTER VIEWING THE PRODUCTION

- How does Medea embody the Appalachian Granny Magic tradition?
- How does the contemporary portrait differ from the Appalachian Granny Magic tradition?
- What do you think happens to Medea after the play?
- Which character shares the most responsibility for the play's tragic events?
- If you were to write a letter to Jason about the abandonment of his son, what would you say?

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Medea & the tradition of Appalachian Granny Magic* by [Samantha Bridges](#)

### **The Medea Company**

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**This production is made possible by a grant from  
The Associated Colleges of the South**