
Too Hot to Handle?

Medea for Schools: Part 2 (July 2017)

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Practice makes perfect, or at the very least helps one to improve and refine one's approach. Being given the opportunity to repeat the [workshop we ran last year](#), and to learn and build on the experience we garnered then, was a wonderful opportunity. The second workshop was again taught for Year 10 students at secondary schools where Classical subjects are not currently taught. It was part of a day of activities organised by the University of Roehampton's [Schools and Colleges Engagement Team](#), which believes that any student, regardless of their background, can benefit from studying at university. The team works in close partnership with over 70 local schools and colleges to provide information, advice and guidance to staff and students, as well as aspiration raising activity for a range of age groups, and offers a variety of activities for school and college students to help them gain an understanding of university life.

I decided to focus on the beginning of the play from Medea's opening monologue to the scene of her first interactions with the chorus of Corinthian women and the nurse before the arrival of Creon. The students were encouraged to choose their own smaller section from their double-faced one-page handout and work with it closely. The aim was to give them a sense of ownership of the text and something tangible to take away with them from their session with us.

A major difference this time round was that I was leading an all-female group of students and staff, which changed the overall dynamic of our engagement with the ancient text. I was struck by the fact that all the sub-groups, into which we divided our half of the visiting class, zeroed in on the questions the play raises about the role of women. And they focused on the female voices, Medea, the nurse, and the chorus. They immediately started to see parallels between Medea's plight and contemporary problems faced by women today. This gave them a direct way into the ancient tragedy and made it feel really relevant to them. To help foster a safe space for performance each sub-group worked at its own table with the teachers who accompanied them, Roehampton volunteers and me as group leader circulating among them answering questions, and clarifying elements of the short passage they had each chosen to work on. Each group therefore felt comfortable to present its own take of their chosen passage.

The students seemed particularly fascinated by the contrast between the communal voices of the chorus and the powerful utterances of Medea. They approached these in different ways, some groups chanting together the lines of the chorus, others dividing the lines amongst themselves and each student taking it in turn to speak a few of Medea's lines before passing the baton to her fellow. This was an opportunity for students to experience some of the magic of the Greek chorus' interactions with the actors/actresses, which nowadays is often considered as a major stumbling block for modern audiences of Greek tragedy. The female students we were working with, however, accepted it straightaway. They understood the chorus as part of the female community that surrounds Medea.

In the final discussion following all the short dramatic readings/performance we posed a deliberately clear-cut question; from what you learned today about Euripides' *Medea* who do you support Jason or Medea? Which character do you most sympathise with? It was a wonderful surprise to note that students also came up with a third option all on their own, which was the very point I was going to conclude on. Greek tragedy offers us no easy answers; instead all the positions it presents are inherently problematic. Both Medea and Jason behave in questionable ways and neither is entirely correct in their actions and responses. The students were keen to know what happens at the end of the play and were interested to hear that Medea defeats Jason in contrast to what they were expecting. Many took Medea's side, precisely because of her gender but they did make a point of mentioning how disturbing they found the fact that she kills her own sons. This was an excellent way into talking briefly about the importance of sons in ancient families.

This was just one of the ways in which the students made the text and the story more generally their own and we hope felt part of the reception and transmission of the text. This was the most important point that we hope they took away from our session, especially since they came to the workshop with no knowledge of the play or even of classics more generally. To end on a personal note, for me co-leading these two workshops demonstrated yet again the power of Greek tragedy and that it is accessible to modern audiences even without any prior knowledge. Anyone can find their own way into the powerful dilemmas it dramatises and to assume that younger audiences cannot deal with such material is to do them an injustice.

Feedback from the students included the following in response to the statement '**Something I Enjoyed**':

- 'I liked the learning new subjects that I didn't know you could take at University'
- 'Acting the play out in the beginning'
- 'I enjoyed seeing some at the courses and the lecture about the play'

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