

# Empedocles' Love and Strife and Medea Adaptations as Archetype

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Once upon a time, before there was the 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian,' there were the cosmic forces of Love (φιλότης) and Strife (νεῖκος), the double-headed font of all creation, or so said Empedocles in the 5th century BC.<sup>1</sup> Empedocles understood the cosmos as locked in an eternal cycle between these two forces:

"For they are, as they were before and will be, nor do I think that endless time will ever be empty of these two."<sup>2</sup>

According to him, in the very beginning, when Love first dominates Strife, there is complete harmony and all elements are inert. As Strife grows stronger and dominates Love, there is chaos and the elements run amok. Life and creation as we know it only come into being during the process of contention between these two forces—the elements arrange themselves in various relationships of contrasts as they are acted upon by both Love and Strife in different ways. Creation exists in a fragile limbo and is ultimately destroyed when Strife overpowers Love and chaos ensues—then, this generative cycle can repeat all over again. While we might reject Empedocles' theory of cosmic creation today, his thought is helpful in understanding the primordial archetype of Life (and Soul) as a tense duality. Modern thinkers, especially in the Freudian school, have also picked up on this ancient dual understanding of the psyche, now reimagining these forces as the two drives of 'Eros' (life instinct) and 'Thanatos' (death instinct). While I don't think real human psyche is quite so easily understood, I do think this Love/Strife duality is a helpful way to conceive of mythical and fictional archetypes. Here, I use 'archetype' both in the colloquial sense, as in a recurring character-model or motif, and also in the Jungian sense, as a primitive self-image of the human embedded within our 'collective unconscious.' After all, what is mythology if not the eternal stories that reveal truths about this collective unconscious?

I think the most fascinating example of the Love/Strife duality embodied in a character is Medea, the most controversial anti-heroine/witch/villain of Greek legend. She is particularly suited for a primordial essence since she is a princess of the far away land of Colchis, outside of Greek civilization. Moreover, as a sorceress, she is also *transformative* by her very nature, which is also the crux of the Love/Strife duality. In Apollonius of Rhodes' *The Argonautica* (3rd c. BC)—as also in other older versions of the myth—Medea, hit by Eros' arrow, falls in love with the hero Jason and helps him and his argonauts steal the Golden Fleece from Colchis and return to Greece.<sup>5</sup> In exchange, she is promised his love and his hand in marriage. Here, it is 'Love' (Ἔρως) as a divine force that drives the plot; harmony is achieved when Jason triumphs *with the help* of Medea's love. Yet, although her love is powerful it is precisely this power that also makes it destructive, which Apollonius narratively foreshadows right at the moment she falls for Jason:

"...just so was the destructive love which crouched unobserved and burnt in Medea's heart."<sup>6</sup>





Euripides explores this further in his own tragedy *Medea* (431 BC), set after Medea and Jason's return to Greece, when things are not going well for them.<sup>7</sup> Some time has passed, and having already had two children with Medea, Jason must now marry the Corinthian Princess Glauce instead in order to secure his rightful place as a Greek prince. He also has to send Medea and their children into exile as a sign of his commitment to Corinth and King Creon, since Medea refuses to quietly accept Jason's new marriage. Jason's calculated choice is devastating for Medea, who sees matters of the heart in an emotional and more primal way than Jason, as he himself criticizes her for:

"Although you could have stayed in this land and house by lightly bearing the deliberations of your betters, you will be banished for your foolish talk."<sup>8</sup>

Unable to accept his betrayal, Medea's Love transforms into Hate (see here: Strife) and she plots her revenge on the people and society that have wronged her. She kills not only Glauce and King Creon, but also, shockingly, her own children by Jason as a way to seek revenge upon him and his legacy. At the end of Euripides' play, by the time Jason is able to confront her, Medea is already making her escape to Athens in a chariot sent by Helios. Interestingly, she is also taking the bodies of their children with her, in order to bury them with the proper rites in Hera's precinct. Thus, although there is hatred, divine vengeance, and infanticide, the smallest sliver of love may still remain in her heart in this final attempt to bury her children. Euripides ends the play on this ambiguous note, and the audience is left to wonder about Medea's humanity vs. her divinity in more ways than one.

While these horrific murders, and especially the infanticide, dehumanize Medea, perhaps that's precisely how we're meant to read her. In Euripides' tragedy, she exists beyond human morality and human rationality. Even the chorus—functioning as a bridge between the audience's emotional response and the narrative of the play—identifies how Medea acts in a manner that is incomprehensible to human beings:

"Sorry creature, why does mind-oppressing rage fall on you and frenzied murder follow these other deaths? The stain of kindred blood is hard for humans"<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, her escape at the end of the play in a *deus ex machina* manner—quite literally, in a divine chariot lifted into the air by the μηχανή ('mechane') Greek theater device usually reserved for deities<sup>10</sup>—speaks to the fact that on some level she is *outside* of polite Greek civilization, and by extension, humanity itself. Thus I wonder, is she simply a 'girl-boss gone rogue' as some (superficial) feminist readings have suggested, or is she an embodiment of something even more ancient and mysterious than the female herself? I suggest, if we give Euripides some credit, it is this latter more complex thing. To return to the Empedoclean Love/Strife duality as an archetype, I posit that this is perhaps the clearest way to understand Medea's character. She is these primordial forces embodied; a commentary on the fragility of creation itself. Not only is she transformed by Love and later by Strife, she is also *the creator and the destroyer*—both of Jason's legacy (see: κλέος) as a hero, and also of the very children she birthed herself. This is to say, she destroys precisely that which she first created out of Love, with no regard for the woes of humanity and morality. I am not giving a positive spin on Euripides' *Medea* or celebrating her as some 'empowered woman'; in fact, I argue that she can only be truly understood as a primordial force because she is so *unwomanly* and *non-human* in this story. It is worth keeping in mind, also, that as a princess of Colchis and as a sorceress with mysterious powers, she represents all that is foreign to Greek civilization. Her inability to fit in once in Greece with Jason reflects not only that her purpose in the creation of Jason's legacy is served, but that now she herself will be the harbinger of his destruction. Her foreign and magical aspects are key; if Greek civilization represents humanity, rationality, and ordered creation, Medea instead represents the primordial, the irrational, and the chaotic. For this reason, I suggest that the character of Medea can be understood as the *microcosmic* representation of the archetypal Empedoclean Love/Strife *cosmic* cycle—with creation and civilization as the fragile, negotiated limbo between these two unconscious forces.



The Ancients recognized this archetype in the Medea myth implicitly, since all variations and artistic depictions of her story emphasize her divine and mysterious nature. This understanding is inherited by the Romans as well in their adaptations of the Medea story such as in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*<sup>11</sup> and *Heroides*,<sup>12</sup> and this is also seen in later depictions of Medea on ancient grave stelae and sarcophagi. Here, interestingly, we might ask why the ancients connected Medea to funeral rites, death, and the afterlife. Besides the obvious fact that she divinely escapes death in her various narratives herself, there might also be an implicit recognition that Medea's archetype is one of destruction and rebirth. Not only does she rise from the very ashes she creates, she goes on living and being 'reborn' through the many variations and additions to her story—much beyond her life with Jason—that have spawned since Euripides' time. Indeed, much more can and has been said just on this connection between Medea's many lives and ancient funeral rites.<sup>13</sup> Given this richness of Medea's interpretive tradition and the fact that her myth also existed much before Empedocles ever wrote his philosophy, I am not so much arguing that Medea was intentionally Empedoclean as much as I am arguing that she represents a mythic archetype in the ancient unconscious that develops and becomes manifest in Empedocles' philosophy of Love and Strife.

Our continued fascination with the Medea archetype even in modern times speaks to how we're all still drawing from that 'ancient unconscious,' at least in our storytelling and art. One such example I personally enjoyed is Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Medea* (1969); an adaptation of her story largely based on the narratives of *The Argonautica* and Euripides' own *Medea*.<sup>14</sup> Much like her Euripides counterpart, Pasolini's Medea is foreign, primal, magical, and temperamental—juxtaposed sharply against Jason and Greek civilization. Played by the beautiful and exotic-looking Maria Callas dressed in vaguely 'oriental' garments, Pasolini's Medea brings to the vivid big screen the essence of the Greek myth. Her clothing, her makeup, her enchanting beauty, etc. all speak to her characterization as a powerful sorceress and femme fatale from a strange land. Pasolini is also quite intentional in how he characterizes Medea's homeland. The Colchis scenes are all filmed in the rugged landscape of Cappadocia, Turkey and the peculiar mix of Tibetan, Persian, and Balkan music and soundscapes adds to this mystical and foreign atmosphere. In contrast, Pasolini depicts Jason and Greek society as an almost Apollonian-ideal; a mise-en-scène of gleaming white marble, order, and of 'virtuous' citizens. However, chaos is always bubbling under the surface in Pasolini's film, as in Euripides' play. The final moment of catharsis in the film is when Medea achieves her revenge on Jason and Corinth, not just by her murderous acts but also by setting fire to the palace (Pasolini's own narrative invention).

I suggest that Pasolini is recognizing the importance of the 'primordial' to the Medea archetype here—the element of fire, and through it Medea, becomes a destructive force much stronger than the civilized world. Like Euripides' version, Pasolini's Medea is not only not morally good, but she is also completely outside of the bounds of human rationality and can only be understood as a cosmic mystery. I highlight that through this recognition and visualization, Pasolini implicitly shows Medea's Empedoclean aspects play out on film; her primordial magic both creates and destroys Jason's legacy, and civilization by extension. Thus, Empedocles' cosmic duality of Love and Strife are at work not just in the ancient versions of Medea I previously discussed, but also in her more modern adaptations. To be sure, Medea becomes an archetype not just in the colloquial sense, but also particularly in a Jungian sense, as a representation of some collective ancient unconscious manifesting in our art even today.



Maria Callas as Medea, Image from: Pier Paolo Pasolini, dir. *Medea*, 1969 (Italy; Port Washington, NY: Entertainment One, 2011, DVD).

One could go even further along this exploration, and, as some have done, consider Medea as an embodiment of another generative ancient duality, namely that of the ‘Apollonian and Dionysian,’ as explored by Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*<sup>15</sup> and also as later developed by Camille Paglia in her *Sexual Personae*.<sup>16</sup> This is certainly relevant, not just for understanding Medea, but also for all of Euripides’ tragedies in general. Relatedly, the Freudian ‘Eros’ (life instinct) and ‘Thanatos’ (death instinct) also speak to the idea of the dual tension involved in the creative processes of civilization—similar to what Empedocles’ philosophy outlines.<sup>17</sup> There is much more that can be written comparing these various creative dualities. For now though, I think it is safe to say that the Medea myth is most interesting when read as a cosmic archetype. In fact, to view her story simply as that of a human woman—‘anti-heroine,’ ‘feminist,’ ‘villain,’ or otherwise—might be to miss the point of her myth entirely. I underscore that when it comes to the domains of art and mythology many mysterious and ancient dualities operate both intertextually and metatextually (via adaptations), more than any of us realize. Myth is not *Truth*, but it isn’t *untrue* either. It is powerful precisely because it is eternal, adaptable across the ages, and reveals something truer than plain fact is able to. This is also why mythology and philosophy always shared a close and bidirectional relationship for the ancients. Myth exposes our own impulses to us, and in the Jungian sense, connects us back to some primitive shared unconscious, long forgotten or outgrown now, but still occasionally manifest in our artistic and literary traditions. Therefore, if nothing else, I wanted this essay to highlight the ways in which even an ancient like Empedocles may still whisper to us moderns, from deep inside the primordial fires of Mt. Etna.

1. For a good English translation of the fragments, see: Brad Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
2. “ἦ γὰρ καὶ πάρος ἔσκε, καὶ ἔσσεται, οὐδέ ποτ’ οἶω, τούτων ἀμφοτέρων κενώσεται ἄσπερος αἰών.”; Empedocles, “Fragment 20/16,” in Inwood, *The Poem of Empedocles*, 213.
3. See: Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1990).; Also: J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, “Thanatos,” in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: W.W. Norton & Company: 1974).
4. See: Carl Jung, *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious, Collected Works* vol. 9 pt. 1, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1981).
5. See: Apollonius of Rhodes, *The Argonautica*, trans. Richard Hunter (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
6. “τοῖος ὑπὸ κραδίῃ εὐλυμένος αἶθερο λάθρη οὐλὸς ἔρωτ’; Apollonius, *The Argonautica*, Book 3, trans. Hunter, 72.
7. See: Euripides, *Medea*, trans. Diane J. Rayor (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
8. “σὺ γάρ, παρὸν γῆν τήνδε καὶ δόμους ἔχειν κοῦφως φεροῖσθι κρείσσονων βουλευμάτων, λόγων ματαιῶν οὔνεκ’ ἐκπεσῇ χθονός.”; Euripides, *Medea*, line 448, trans. Rayor.
9. “δελαια, τί σοι φρενοβαρὴς χόλος προσπίπτει καὶ ζαμενής (...) φόνος ἀμείβεται; χαλεπὰ γὰρ βροτοῖς ὁμογενὴ μιάσματ’ (ἐπὶ γαῖαν αὐτοφόνταις ξυνωδὰ) θεόθεν πίττοντ’ ἐπὶ δόμοις ἄχῃ.”; Euripides, *Medea*, line 1265, trans. Rayor.
10. See an overview of ‘mechane’ as used in the Athens theater here: Thomas G. Chondros, K. Milidonis, G. Vitzilaios, and J. Vaitsis, ““Deus-Ex-Machina” reconstruction in the Athens theater of Dionysus,” *Mechanism and Machine Theory* vol. 67 (Sept. 2013): 172–191, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mechmachtheory.2013.04.010>.
11. See: Ovid, “Medea and Jason,” Book 7, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (New York: Penguin Classics, 2004).
12. See: Ovid, Letter 12, *Ovid’s Heroïdes: A New Translation and Critical Essays*, trans. Paul Murgatroyd, Reeves, and Parker (London: Routledge, 2017).
13. For a discussion of Medea in Roman sarcophagi, see: Sophie Buchanan, “Representing Medea on Roman Sarcophagi: Contemplating a Paradox,” *Ramus* vol. 41, no. 1–2 (2012): 144–60, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0048671X0000291>.
14. Pier Paolo Pasolini, dir. *Medea*, 1969 (Italy; Port Washington, NY: Entertainment One, 2011, DVD).
15. See: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1872, trans. Shaun Whiteside (New York: Penguin Classics, 1994).
16. See: Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991).
17. See: Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 1929, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, reprinted, 2010).



Medea in Helios' Chariot (side A), Red-Figure Calyx-Krater, South Italian, 400 BC, Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH, Image from: <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1991.1>.