Countée Cullen's *Medea*

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Among modern versions of ancient classics, Countée Cullen's *Medea* is a particularly interesting case, partly because of fluctuations in the critical response to Cullen's work, partly because of the author's personal investment in the myth of Medea, and partly because of his essential role in the history of the Harlem Renaissance. Although critical references to Cullen's experiment with tragic form are rare, and late-twentieth-century scholars tend to regard the work as a curious anomaly, the actual significance of the play has yet to be assessed. I will argue that Cullen's *Medea*, though seldom performed, little discussed, and often dismissed as an academic tribute to ancient aesthetics, is actually an impassioned and subversive drama which reflects an essential moment in the history of African American letters.

The choice of a classical motif by an African American poet of the 1930s is in itself remarkable, and contemporary reviews of the printed text, first published in *The Medea and Some Poems* in 1935, are instructive. Philip Blair Rice praised the poem extravagantly in *The Nation*, exulting that "Mr. Cullen has rendered Euripides' best known tragedy into living and utterable English. . . . if there is to be a popular revival of interest in the Greek drama it appears that this is more likely to originate in Harlem than in the universities" (336). But Peter Monro Jack, writing for *The New York Times*, described the play as "an interesting experiment in reducing a Greek tragedy to the content and colloquialism of a folk tale, with characteristic Negro sentiment and rhythm" (15). Whereas the contemporary critical response varied from liberal enthusiasm to racist condescension, recent considerations of the play tend to damn it with faint praise. For Houston Baker, it is an "interesting" work which "possesses little of the grandeur of the original" (50); for Gerald Early, it is a "creative racial misreading" which "simply authenticated" Cullen's "own traditionalist and classical credentials" (67). The charge that the play falls short of the ancient standard seems particularly perplexing. Euripides is, after all, a hard act to follow. Yet twentieth-century writers from T. Sturge Moore to Jean Anouilh and Heiner Müller have been tempted to create modern versions of the myth of Medea, and treatments of the motif by both Maxwell Anderson and Robinson Jeffers were successfully produced on Broadway in the early half of this century. It seems unlikely, moreover, that either Anderson or Jeffers would ever have been accused of merely authenticating his "traditional and classical credentials."

Whereas a version of an ancient myth by a white author may be presumed, for the most part, to succeed or fail on the basis of its own merits, the appreciation of Cullen's drama has been impeded by various misfortunes, not least of which was the death

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of Rose McClendon in 1936. A distinguished actress who had been acclaimed for her work in such plays as Paul Green's *In Abraham's Bosom* and Langston Hughes's *Mulatto*, McClendon was greatly admired by Cullen, who wrote his *Medea* with her in mind for the leading role (Perry 13). In view of Judith Anderson's contribution to the sensational success of Robinson Jeffers's *Medea* in the late forties, it is worth considering that, had she lived, McClendon might well have attracted favorable attention to this play. The reception of Cullen's *Medea* has also been plagued by racial bias, not only from white critics such as the reviewer for the *Times* cited above, for whom the idea of a black Medea was evidently a tiresome curiosity, but also from black critics who assume that Greek myths cannot possibly be relevant to African American experience. An example this kind of thinking is evident in Barksdale and Kinnamon's entry on the poet in *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*: "*The Medea* speaks of the rise and fall of a great woman whose story had nothing to do with race or social doctrines but instead was concerned with the consuming passions of woman as she emerged in the Græco-Roman world" (530). This judgment is problematic, first of all, because of its insistence on categorizing and separating various cultural experiences as if there were no possibility of any common ground between them. In assuming, furthermore, that tragic myth is primarily concerned with the peculiarities of individual psychology, Barksdale and Kinnamon seem to disregard the fact that drama is the most social of literary forms.

Performed since antiquity in the context of public celebrations, tragedy is a dramatic structure in which psychological particulars are never separable from communal perspectives. Though several millennia have passed since Aristotle observed that "tragedy is an imitation of action and not of character" (13), his judgment is arguably as relevant to Cullen's *Medea* as to the Euripidean masterpiece on which it is based. The critical question posed by Cullen's treatment of Euripidean drama is not How does it compare with the ancient model? but, rather, Why would a celebrated African American poet of the 1930s suddenly decide to write a tragedy in which a mother kills her children so as to avenge herself on their arrogant, irresponsible father? I would like to begin by suggesting that the importance of this play inheres not in its psychological portraiture, which is essentially faithful to that of the ancient model, but rather in Cullen's complex and significant synthesis of ancient Greek, contemporary American, and African nationalist elements.

No mere tribute to the art of Euripides, Cullen's *Medea* is an expression of fundamental autobiographical, aesthetic, and communal concerns. Dealing with the most obvious of these first, we may note that, as an abandoned child who was initially raised by his grandmother and later adopted by the Reverend Frederick Asbury Cullen (Perry 3-4), the poet may well have found in Euripides' forlorn protagonist an objective correlative for his peculiarly personal experiences and anxieties. The character Medea may represent Cullen's own abandoned mother, the son she deserted when his father disappeared, or the troubled adult inheritor of a childhood haunted by crises of desertion and abandonment. Reputed to have been more interested in the company of men than of women (Lewis 76-77), Cullen may actually have identified with Medea as the spurned object of a male lover. Whereas Alan Shucard underscores the poet's insistence on "the danger and perfidy of female lovers" in this text (42), the possibility of a sympathetic identification between the author and his female character is wor-

thy of consideration, especially in the light of Amitai F. Avi Ram's discussion of the way Cullen's gay sexual identity manifests itself in his poetry (42). In any case, Cullen's interest in the story of the black woman disastrously involved with a white lover was no casual matter.

The similarities between *Medea* and another of Cullen's experiments with traditional form have prompted Gerald Early to speculate that the poet was attracted to the Euripidean tragedy "for much the same reason he was drawn to *The Ballad of the Brown Girl*; once again, his creative misreading made him think of *The Medea* in racial terms, a woman of color betrayed" (67). It is also worth noting that Cullen's fascination with this myth was not conspicuously diminished by the disappointment of his hope that *Medea* would bring him the theatrical success he longed for. In addition to dramatizing the conflict between Jason and Medea in Corinth, he later returned to the same material, writing an original "Prologue," which deals with Medea and Jason as young lovers in Colchis, and an "Epilogue" set in Athens at the court of Aegeus twenty years after the tragic events in Corinth. The expanded work, entitled *Byword for Evil* (Early 76), sheds light on aspects of Cullen's enterprise which may not be evident to casual readers of his *Medea*. For example, the "Epilogue" focuses on an invented character named Pandion, who is supposed to be the grown son of Medea by Aegeus, a child born soon after the notorious sorceress arrived in Athens after escaping from Corinth. In the dénouement, when Pandion is killed by a vengeful old sailor who turns out to be Jason himself, Medea reveals that this child was actually conceived while she was still living with Jason. Thus, Jason has actually killed his own son, and the "Epilogue" of the expanded work has the effect of changing a play about a mistreated black woman desperate for revenge into a play about a promising young man of mixed parentage who is killed by a vicious white father. Whatever the personal implications of Cullen's evident fascination with this biracial drama of generational catastrophe might have been, the essential importance of his text inheres in its insistence on the patriarchal brutality of a racially ambiguous society.

Whereas the centrality of racial concerns in Cullen's work is apparent, his youthful insistence on being "a poet and not a Negro poet" (Early 23) and poems such as "To Certain Critics" have been used in arguments deploring "his rejection of race" and dedication to "the essentially fatuous artificialities which were, according to him, the poet's true concern" (Lomax 220). The possibility, however, that Cullen's insistence on traditional forms might imply something other than a devotion to "fatuous artificialities" is suggested by Gary Smith in an essay on "The Black Protest Sonnet." While acknowledging that "the central paradox" of the Harlem Renaissance as a literary phenomenon "is the discrepancy between theory and practice" or the difference between "what the poets proposed in theory and what they actually accomplished in their poetry," Smith nevertheless insists on the radical import of poems such as Claude McKay's "If We Must Die" and Cullen's own "From the Dark Tower," both of which are cast in the "genteel literary form" of the sonnet (2). Smith's observations on the subversive uses of traditional form seem all the more relevant to Cullen's experiment with tragic structure, since *Medea* was written during a period when Cullen was conspicuously concerned with contemporary racial problems.

In the year that *Medea and Some Poems* was published, Cullen served as a member of the commission appointed to investigate the New York race riot (Lumpkin 114). Furthermore, the volume in which his version of *Medea* appears also contains an emphatic articulation of his exasperation with American racism, the short poem entitled "Scottsboro Too Is Worth Its

Song." Inspired by the notorious Scottsboro case, in which nine black men falsely accused of raping two white women were convicted and sentenced by an all-white jury (Tindall and Shi 668), the poem is remarkable for its bitter irony. In it, Cullen reproaches contemporary American writers who responded passionately to the trial of Sacco and Vanzetti for giving short shrift to the Scottsboro case. The poignant intensity of this complaint underscores the problematic nature of the claim that *Medea* has nothing to do with race relations.

Cullen's *Medea* is a passionate critique of contemporary culture.

To be sure, the mythical plot of this tragedy presents formidable difficulties in whatever version it appears. Focusing on the suffering of an emigrant woman who has been abandoned by the hero Jason, for whom she has given up everything, the play culminates in Medea's bloody revenge: In order to punish Jason, she kills the two children she has borne him. The spectacular dénouement of this astonishing drama has, understandably enough, troubled many critics. In an essay on the Euripidean text, the classicist Denys Lionel Page observes, for example, that "the murder of the children . . . is mere brutality; if it moves us at all, it does so towards incredulity and horror. Such an act is outside our experience; we—and the fifth century Athenian—know nothing of it" (xiv). Though recent references to Page's judgment express either respectful disagreement (McDermott 25) or frank amazement (Simon 87), the fact remains that it was not until 1977 that E. P. Easterling argued that the psychology of abuse might actually have some bearing on the tragic scenario. In retrospect, the denial of significance in the act of child murder seems particularly unconvincing. Not only does the murder of children figure prominently in a great number of ancient myths, such as those of Cronos, Uranus, Thyestes, Tereus, Ino, Agave, and Erechtheus, it is also a persistent theme in dreadful current events such as the comparatively recent trials of Hedda Nussbaum and Susan Smith. It is worth noting, moreover, that Page's perspective on Medea's murder of her children is analogous to that of Barksdale and Kinnamon on Cullen's *Medea*. In either case, the critical argument depends on the assumption that tragic effect depends on character rather than action. For Barksdale and Kinnamon, as well as for Page, Aristotle's view of action as the soul of tragedy would seem to be a superfluity. Indeed, it is quite possible that the difficulty in evaluating dramatic versions of *Medea* inheres precisely in the nature of the tragic action involved.

Although the evidence of infanticidal practices and customs is abundantly and minutely documented in various sources (Langer, Radbill), McDermott's description of Medea's crime as "literally unspeakable" (26) seems justified by the feeling of horror which the very mention of the act of child-murder inspires in most people. Unspeakable in the precise degree to which it is unthinkable, the act has been cast, in the words of Maria Piers, "into the twilight of semi-consciousness, both by those who fail to see it and by those who commit it, and by the rest of us who permit it" (16). This emphasis on the role of the subconscious in the perception of violence against children suggests the operation of something very like a taboo. In fact, Barbara Johnson has observed that, "when a woman speaks about the death of children in any sense other than that of pure loss, a powerful taboo is being violated," and I have argued elsewhere (*The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children*) that the persistent emphasis on character in discussions of *The Medea* may derive, at least in part, from the painfully repellent nature of the central act on which the drama depends. Rather than regard Medea's

revenge as a response to brutal conditions with which we are uncomfortably familiar, we may distance ourselves from the gruesome implications of her act by dismissing the agent as an insane foreigner or a demonic sorceress. She is not like us. She is an eccentric savage from an uncivilized wilderness. If Medea's revenge is an emanation of deranged psychology rather than the necessary outcome of a particular conjunction of circumstance and character, we may safely dispense with any consideration of a possible link between social pathology and human suffering. A noteworthy element in the general literature on the tragic myth of Medea, the denial of significance in the act of child murder is particularly problematic in the context of American literature.

The themes of racism and infanticide regularly complement each other in the annals of slavery. Linda Brent, a woman who escaped from captivity and wrote a narrative account of her experiences, observed that colored children of white mothers were liable to be smothered at birth (52). She repeatedly wished that her own children might die in infancy or be killed rather than brought up to live as slaves (63, 81). In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe presents the character Cassie, who actually does kill a child rather than abandon him to a life of bondage. In a short story called "Désirée's Baby," Kate Chopin tells the tale of a colored baby born to a young white woman who is so distraught that she suffocates the child. More recently, Toni Morrison has demonstrated the connection between cultural context and literary nightmare in *Beloved*, a novel based on the actual case of a young woman who escaped with her children from slavery and later, upon the point of being recaptured, killed her baby daughter in order to save her from a fate worse than death. To be sure, the idea that institutional racism kills children was widely discussed in the nineteen sixties and seventies, when black militants such as Angela Davis, Eldridge Cleaver, and Huey Newton accused the government of systematically killing black people, defining as murder the neglect of treatable illness, malnourishment in a land of abundance, and lead poisoning among children hungry enough to eat the paint off the walls of tenement apartments (Law and Clift 181-83). But the works of Brent, Stowe, Chopin, and Cullen himself suggest that the relationship between racism and child murder was well known to various writers well before the dissemination of militant ideology in the second half of this century.

Far from being a banal exercise in imitation, Cullen's *Medea* is a passionate critique of contemporary culture. The very choice of the myth of Medea may be regarded as subversive, not only because of the theme of child murder, but also because it is the story of a stranger in a strange land, an alien dispossessed by arrogant imperialists. Like Morrison's *Beloved*, *Medea* deals with the betrayal of trust, the necessity of choosing between vile enslavement and dreadful freedom, and the ferocious character of an individual incapable of voluntary self-debasement. The essential theme of this play is, in short, the question of violence as an instrument of policy. In his concern with this painful issue, Cullen found a startling congruence between ancient dramatic structure and modern political discourse.

The subversive quality of the Euripidean model is immediately evident in the fact that the first person who speaks as the play begins is a female slave. That Cullen adheres to ancient precedent by introducing the action of his own play with an expository speech by Medea's loyal servant is a significant endorsement of an inherently irreverent view of established order. Although his Nurse differs from that of the classical tragedian in that

she speaks in prose, not poetry, the substance of her complaint is essentially the same as that of her ancient prototype. Regretting all the events leading up to the present moment, she wishes the Greeks had never landed in Colchis, laments the loss of an earlier period of comparative happiness, and blames her master, Jason, for "all of our troubles." The man has broken his vows, betrayed his wife and children, left Medea prostrate and fasting. The mistress spends her time grieving and weeping; she is ashamed and debased, calling to mind "all she gave up for this sad fate: home, father, country." But Medea, "brooding on her dark designs," is still a force to be reckoned with, for "she is proud, and not one to be hurt without vengeance" (264). Thus, Cullen's Nurse, like that of Euripides, is a servant who sympathizes with Medea as a woman with whom she shares a common ethnic origin as well as the state of exile. She describes her mistress as one who has been lured away from her native land and called upon to make great sacrifices by an arrogant adventurer who has left her in a wretched state.

Like the children of Africans forcibly recruited into the project of building a nation from whose promise they and their progeny would be systematically excluded, Medea is miserable and dejected, but not entirely defeated. The Nurse's reference to the lost homeland as "our country" and her insistence on Medea's characteristic pride suggest a possible analogy with Cullen's contemporary, Marcus Garvey, who advocated the establishment of an African Homeland for Black Americans. Medea's own nostalgic longing for her lost home may register as an impassioned echo of the Back to Africa movement: "O my native land, where there is peace and quiet, I wish I had never left you" (271). The choral description of her flight from Colchis contains, moreover, a possible reminder of other infamous ocean voyages: "In her anguish, she calls on the gods, who take note of every broken pledge, who led her across the sea with Jason, over the pathless waters" (269). Although the captive Africans who were forced to endure the Middle Passage did not, like Medea, embark willingly "over the pathless waters," their journey is comparable to hers in several ways. First, the Colchian sorceress was a plaything of the gods who inspired her with love for Jason, and the Greeks did not regard her decision to leave her native land as having anything to do with free will. Second, Medea cannot go home again.

If Medea echoes the lament of the chorus, describing herself as "a stranger among you, wronged by my husband, far from my native land" (269), she also concedes, in a furious exchange with Jason, that going back is not an option:

> You say you come as a friend? Give me a friend's counsel then. Advise me. Where shall I go? Where can I go? Back to my father's house? Will he kill the fatted calf for the daughter who betrayed him and brought his gray hairs to shame? (275)

Though Medea's alienation from her homeland is clearly a consequence of her alliance with Jason, a partnership which he instigated and from which he has benefitted, he is prepared to take just about as much responsibility for her present predicament as certain inheritors of white American slave society are willing to assume for the social problems of African Americans today. In effect, Jason tells Medea to stop whining and pull herself up by her bootstraps. For Medea, however, the return to the land of origin is no more an option than it is for the average African American. Her lamentation for the land she left behind is less a realistic consideration of options than a nostalgic articulation of sorrow.

While Cullen's portrait of the bereaved exile underscores the analogy between mythical characters and contemporary injustice, the theme of alienation is only one of the Euripidean elements of his characterization which correspond to modern cultural expres-

sions. To begin with a seemingly obvious consideration, Medea is a woman with the blues. She moans unconsolably from within the house before she ever sets foot on stage: "O misery and shame! To be so despised and fallen! Would that I were dead and gone and laid in my grave" (266). Thus, she expresses the abject misery of the woman abandoned, a favorite theme of such celebrated artists as Cullen's friend Alberta Hunter, who crooned:

> My man mistreated me
> And he drove me from his door
> Lord he mistreated me
> And he drove me from his door
> But the good book says
> You've got to reap just what you sow.

Like the singer who complains of "those down-hearted blues," Medea is described by the Nurse as unable "to lift her eyes from the ground" (264). Just as the singer comforts herself by the thought that her faithless lover will "reap just what he sows," Medea eventually consoles herself by plotting revenge, so that the drama actually accomplishes the reversal of fortunes which the singer patiently anticipates:

> Lord it may be a week
> And it may be a month or two
> I said it may be a week
> And it may be a month or two
> All the things you're doing to me
> Sure coming back to you.

If the lady who sings the blues seems on the whole more philosophically resigned to her fate than Medea, it is also true that her complaint is primarily directed at a man whose essential fault is that he has hurt her feelings. For Medea, however, Jason is not merely the man who "done her wrong"— he is also a deadbeat dad.

Like his Euripidean prototype, Cullen's Jason pays lip service to the concept of paternal love, piously telling his boys that their "father has never neglected or forgotten them" (287), and he assures Medea that he has "acted for [her] own good and that of [their] children" (276). But his record of broken promises does not contribute to his credibility when he tells the mother of his children, "Trust me, Medea, I'll take care of them" (288). On the other hand, Medea's simple assertion that "Jason has prepared nothing for them" (272) is corroborated by the Nurse, who describes her master as "a man who betrays his own children" (266). The possibility that, in Jason's case, neglect of parental responsibilities is linked to actual hostility toward his sons is suggested by the wording of his self-serving rationale for abandoning his wife and children:

> I did not seek this chance as you accuse me of doing, either because I was tired of you or not for new embraces. Nor God knows, because I wanted to make more brats. (276)

Not only is Jason's reference to his ostensibly esteemed progeny as "brats" disconcerting, but it also tends to undermine his argument that he is only marrying the princess in order to secure a prosperous future for his children. Since the royal family with which he plans to ally himself clearly has no interest in nurturing rival contenders for succession to the throne, Jason seems absurdly oblivious to the possible consequences of his actions. In fact, his argument suggests that the children's lives are endangered, not because their mother is a monster, but because their father regards them as something of a nuisance, and nobody else really wants to have them around. Thus, Cullen's *Medea* not only dramatizes the lament of the female blues singer, but also hints at the general sense of emotional deprivation and abandonment implicit in B. B. King's plaintive classic "Nobody loves me but my mother and she could be jivin', too."

Whereas Cullen's faithless husband and improvident father reflects the figure of the sexually exploitive and blatantly hypocritic white master, his abandoned wife and mother outsmarts him with an offensive ploy which is really a kind of ritualized groveling. Confiding in advance to the women of the chorus that she will cajole Jason with feigned humility, she says she "will receive him meekly" and

"beg his pardon." She will "see nothing but honesty and decency in his every word and move." In short, she will humble herself before him and beg him to let her sons stay on in Corinth (284). When Jason responds to her summons, Medea is the soul of compliance:

> Forgive me, Jason, and let us bury the past if you will. I am weary of beating against the wind. Forgive my bitter words in memory of the sweeter ones we once spoke together. I have wrestled with myself and I have come to my senses at last. "Why," I reasoned, "why rage against the one man in all the world who has your interests at heart?" . . . I was a fool . . . . But I am only a woman, and it takes us time to see these things. (286)

Although this delicious deception is essentially faithful to the Euripidean text, it takes on new meaning when spoken by a dispossessed black woman to a smug white master. Medea's repeated plea for forgiveness and her self-disparaging admission that she has "finally come to her senses at last" are not only outrageously out of character; they are also entirely consistent with the stereotype of the mealy-mouthed step'n'fetchit. Medea is putting the master on. Her self-deprecating "I am only a woman," which might as well read "I am only a nigger," is a wily concession to the master's characteristic prejudices. Just as the Euripidean "hero" underestimates the intelligence of the benighted female barbarian, so Cullen's Jason confuses the privileges of race and gender with the actual dimensions of human possibility. In both works, the ostracized individual, dismissed as the less-than-human Other, responds with a calculated and calculating intrigue designed to establish a tragic "equality" between subject and ruler. Cullen's perception of this scene as a study in stylized passive aggression with a peculiarly African American resonance is a brilliant dramatization of the congruence between sexist and racist assumptions of superiority.

Even in the ancient tragedy, the opposition between Jason as arrogant imperialist and Medea as royal barbarian may suggest the dimensions of a strangely familiar American struggle. In fact, the degree to which Cullen's text depends on the peculiar relevance of ancient passions to modern controversy is conspicuously evident in his version of the speech in which Jason holds forth about Medea's good fortune in having found a benefactor such as himself:

> Instead of leaving you to waste your days in your own wild country I brought you here to Greece, the queen of all the nations of the world. Here you have learned what justice is, and law and order, you who had seen nothing but violence and brute force. (276)

The language of this passage is remarkable, not only for its fidelity to the spirit of the Euripidean model (see *Medea* ll. 536-38), but also because such a phrase as "your own wild country" might just as easily suggest an American view of "the dark continent" as a Greek description of the land of Colchis. In fact, Jason's argument bears a noteworthy resemblance to that of certain nineteenth-century American apologists for slavery. George Fitzhugh's response to the abolitionist debate is a good example of the pro-slavery position:

> We would remind those who deprecate and sympathize with negro slavery, that his slavery here relieves him from a far more cruel slavery in Africa, or from idolatry and cannibalism, and every brutal vice and crime that can disgrace humanity; and that it christianizes, protects, supports and civilizes him . . . . (89)

Like the apologists for slavery, Jason is in the absurd position of suggesting that his exploitive aggression is actually a demonstration of altruism and generosity for which his antagonist should thank him. On the other hand, Cullen's Nurse, the ostensible voice of slavery in this play, speaks in a style which vaguely resembles that of slave narrators such as Equiano, Frederick

Douglass, and Linda Brent. The Nurse complains, for instance, that "our masters are violent and uncurbed in their passions. We who live humbly are better off than they. It is better to live contented than to be famous" (267). Finally, the despair of Cullen's protagonist is best understood in light of the fact that the rank of a Greek woman deprived of all connections to family, husband, and country was virtually equivalent to that of a slave (Vellacott 104).

Although the dichotomy between Greek and barbarian is as deeply embedded in the ancient text as is the assumption of male superiority, Cullen's articulation of the tensions implicit in the tragedy tends to suggest the operation of essentially modern chauvinisms. Whereas the Euripidean Jason displays notable misogyny when he distinguishes between "human beings" and "the female race" (*Medea* ll. 573-74), Cullen's Jason intensifies the insult by saying that women are nothing but animals, complaining that "the gods should have made some other animal for men to couple with and to get children by, instead of women" (277). Elsewhere, Cullen's tainted hero expresses a physical disgust for Medea which does not appear in the original. Finally vanquished, Jason fumes angrily, cursing both Medea and "the day that ever I thrust into your vile body the seed" from which their children came (303). His loathing for her "vile body" has the excessive quality of racist contempt.

Whereas Jason's physical revulsion evokes the insult of racial bigotry, Aegeus's sympathetic support recalls the solace which Cullen and other African Americans of his generation sought and found abroad, especially in Paris, during the period between the two World Wars. Listening patiently as Medea pleads for help on bended knees, the Athenian king lifts her up with an invitation and a promise:

> I'll help you, Medea. If once you come to my country, I will receive you in all friendliness. I cannot raise a finger to help you here in Corinth where Creon is king, you understand that. . . . But in my own country I do as I please! Come there of your own free will, and I promise you shelter and safety, and no man shall drive you out, or come in and take you. (282)

Although he is no more willing to tangle with the Corinthian establishment than a modern French government would be to intervene in the internal affairs of the United States, the Athenian king promises to welcome Medea if she can manage the journey on her own, thus extending to her just such comfort as individual Americans of all colors regularly found in France during Cullen's lifetime. With this offer of hospitality and protection, Aegeus opens up an avenue of escape from exploitation and injury such as the one that Paris offered to Cullen himself. In a notebook of the period, he wrote:

> . . . Paris is a peerless city. Liberty, equality, fraternity are not only words. They express the spirit of which Paris is made. . . . In Paris I find everything that appeals to me: lights, noises in the night, places where one has fun according to one's liking, a sympathetic and tolerant world, in sum, a true civilization. (qtd. in Fabre 81-82)

In fact, the genesis of Cullen's *Medea* may be traced to the cosmopolitan spirit and cultural ferment which repeatedly drew Cullen back to Paris during the 1930s.

A francophile who received a Guggenheim grant in 1928 which allowed him to live for several years in France, Cullen sojourned in Paris for part of every year from 1926 until 1938, earning his living by teaching French at Frederick Douglass Junior High School in New York City from 1934 until his death in 1946. An enthusiast of such popular diversions as the "Bal Colonial," a Parisian gathering place for Martiniquans which he described in an article published in *Opportunity* in 1928 (Fabre 78-79),

Cullen also cultivated a wide circle of French-speaking acquaintances. Among these were the four Nardal sisters, whose literary and artistic salon was frequented by such figures as Alain Locke, René Maran, and the Haitian Dr. Sajour. Along with Paulette Nardal, Sajour organized the *Revue du monde noire*, which published the work of various artists of the African diaspora, including such writers of the Harlem Renaissance as James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, and Alain Locke. Described by Michel Fabre as "an important first step toward the Négritude movement," the Nardal group was a lively center of cosmopolitan black culture, and it welcomed Cullen with unreserved enthusiasm, admiring "his polish, refinement and discreet tastes," seeing in him "a fine example of Negro genius, a luminary of the Negro race" (Fabre 90). Cullen's participation in the social and intellectual ferment which anticipated the beginnings of Négritude is particularly interesting in view of the curious affinity between his dramatic heroine and the African Mother, who would loom large as a symbol of the African homeland in Négritude poetry.

Although nearly forty years would elapse between the publication of *Medea* and that of David Diop's "A une Danseuse noire" ("To a Black Dancer") in 1973, the kinship between the two figures is striking, and it is interesting to consider "A une Danseuse noire" as a portrait of the charms which might have beguiled Jason when he first encountered his exotic sorceress:

> Négresse, ma chaude rumeur d'Afrique
> Ma terre d'énigme et mon fruit de raison
> Tu es danse par la joie nue de ton sourire
> Par l'offrande de tes seins et tes secrets pouvoirs (14)
>
> Negress, my warm rumor of Africa
> My land of mystery and my fruit of reason
> You are the dance by the naked joy of your smile
> By the offering of your breasts and your secret powers.

While insisting on a specifically African context with such phrases as "ma chaude rumeur d'Afrique," this poem emphasizes the connection between the sensual allure of the African woman and her reproductive power—"Par l'offrande de tes seins et tes secrets pouvoirs."

The link between sexuality and generativity is also implicit in ancient tragedy, which was celebrated in the context of the festival of Dionysos, the Greek god of wine, harvests, and fecundity. A priestess of the goddess Hecate, Medea herself was associated with the magic of fertility. Thus, in the manner of her Euripidean prototype, Cullen's Medea promises King Aegeus that she will cure him of the plight of childlessness: "I know charms and magic words to give life even to your seed. Believe me, Aegeus, I can raise up children to you" (282). The "charms and magic" with which she tempts him are as redolent of Diop's "Danseuse noire" as they are faithful to her ancient model, so that, in retrospect, Cullen's Medea may seem like an ancestress of the African Mother who would be celebrated by a later generation of black poets. Yet the Négritude movement was little more than a glimmering on the horizon when Cullen sojourned in France, and his tragedy has every appearance of being the child of a cosmopolitan community in which the articulation of African identity was only a single aspect of the larger question of colonial conflict. Of particular importance in the case of a literary treatment of Medea written by an American who spent a good deal of time in France during the thirties is the fact that an important modern version of the myth was produced in Paris just four years before the publication of Cullen's *Medea*.

Asie (*Asia*) by Henri-René Lenormand articulates the ancient plot in the context of the French colonial empire. Even in the absence of precise information as to whether this play was known to Cullen, the possibility

that it might have been is worth considering, first of all because Lenormand was an important French dramatist of the period, and the wide range of Cullen's intellectual interests might well have prompted him to attend a performance of the play. Secondly, *Asie* is, like Cullen's *Medea*, a drama which emphasizes the racial aspect of the hostility between colonizer and colonized. In Lenormand's treatment of the myth, "Jason" is an enterprising French adventurer named De Mezzana, married to the Indochinese Princess Katha Naham Moun, by whom he has two sons. After persuading his wife to leave her home and settle down with him and their children in France, De Mezzana decides to abandon the Princess and take up with an attractive young French woman. Hoping to make "white boys" out of progeny he describes as "two little lost monkeys whimpering on the edge of the forest," De Mezzana enrolls them in a French school where the racist schoolteacher holds them up to ridicule, entertaining the class with remarks about "exotic fauna" (Lenormand 41). In short, the brutality of the colonial order is so vividly depicted in this play that the mother's fierce resolve to save her sons from becoming "the lackeys of monsters" augments the credibility of her decision to kill them along with herself. Although Lenormand's tragedy is an intriguing synthesis of ancient plot and colonial context which is likely to have attracted Cullen's interest, it is only one of many contemporary articulations of the essential problems dramatized by his *Medea*.

Whereas *Asie* might have suggested the link between ancient tragedy and modern experience, René Maran's *Batouala* is certain to have fueled Cullen's interest in the context of colonial Africa. A novel which won Maran the Goncourt prize for literature in 1921, *Batouala* was further distinguished by being banned in all of the French African colonies. Described by Senghor as a precursor of the Négritude movement (Irele 142) and generally credited as "the first to make Africa a living presence in an imaginative work in the French language" (Irele 147), Maran attracted Cullen's attention as early as 1922, when the American read *Batouala* with considerable enthusiasm (Fabre 77). Though the action of *Batouala* has little in common with that of *Medea*, the novel and the play do share certain thematic concerns. Both texts insist on the destructive jealousy of women, on the inevitability of revenge, on the intervention of sorcerers, on the abuses of colonial regimes, and on the general antipathy between black and white cultures. In addition to such major concerns, Maran's novel anticipates the texture of Cullen's drama in his allusion to white men who desert the children born to them by black women (Maran 90), in his insistence on the burden of child rearing (176), and in symbolic references to lions (176-78) which recall the ancient description of Medea as a raging lion (Euripides 190). The thematic and textual elements shared by *Batouala* and *Medea* suggest that Cullen's articulation of the tragic myth anticipates the drama of Wole Soyinka in its synthesis of ancient Greek and traditional African elements. To the extent that Cullen's treatment of the conflict between Jason and Medea may be read as a discreet externalization of his own frustration with the project of effecting a harmonious marriage between white and black cultures, his drama constitutes a metapoetic deployment of the demons with which he struggled throughout his creative life. Yet the claim that Cullen's *Medea* articulates the author's own intensely experienced grief must ultimately depend on the degree to which his most essential concerns coincide with those of Euripides.

The barbarian protagonist presented by Euripides in 431 B.C.E. personifies all too well the sensibility of the "pagan mad," "black sheep," "pagan heart" described in "Pagan Prayer" (92-93) by the poet who elsewhere

rejected the concept of "civilization" outright: "Not yet has my heart or head / In the least way realized / That they and I are civilized" ("Heritage" 108). The very fact that Euripides' *Medea* ultimately mocks every so-called civilized pretension might sufficiently explain its appeal for Cullen, who insisted, in *Caroling Dusk*, on the difficulty of "reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan inclination" (Early 57-58), and often enough celebrated the concept of "barbarism" as a beneficent antidote to smug declarations of "civilizing" intent. In fact, Cullen's depiction of Medea's spectacular pride and passionate vengeance is not likely to be dismissed as a formal exercise by any reader of the familiar lines from "Heritage": "One thing only I must do: / Quench my pride and cool my blood, / Lest I perish in the flood" (107). Although such texts demonstrate the importance of Cullen's focus on his barbarian protagonist, they are far from clarifying the basic interpretive problem posed by his tragic drama. Needless to say, the poet is not presenting Medea as a role model, or the story of her conflict with Jason as a paradigm for conflict resolution. The play is, however, a meditation on the generation and expression of violent anger. As such, it represents an essential moment in the history of the Harlem Renaissance.

At first identified with an unprecedented upsurge of optimistic belief in the possibility of peaceful, steady improvement in the lives of African Americans, the Harlem Renaissance was described by Arna Bontemps as a period of expansive hope within the Black community. He cites the poem "I Have a Rendezvous with Life," written by Cullen when he was still in high school, and published in the DeWitt Clinton literary magazine in 1921, as "the first clear signal" of a period which would be distinguished by flourishing artistic and intellectual activity within the African American community (2). The tone of moderation and conciliation in the up and coming generation of black writers was especially praised by influential white scholars. Carl Van Doren observed that "being . . . a race not given to self-destroying bitterness," African Americans would "strike a happy balance between rage and complacency—that balance in which passion and humor are somehow united in the best of all possible amalgams for the creative artist" (qtd. in Bontemps 13). Speeches such as this one, published in *Opportunity* in 1924, describe a mood of relative optimism, and also contain a discreet promise: "If you behave yourselves, you will be rewarded."

Ten years later, after the eruption of the Scottsboro affair, after the intensification of activity by the Ku Klux Klan and the scourge of the Great Depression, the general disappointment would be all the more bitter, precisely because the initial promise of the "Renaissance" had been so seductive and glowing. Van Doren's complacent expectation that African Americans would achieve "a happy balance between rage and complacency" would be mocked by Cullen in such poems as "Mood"—

> I think an impulse stronger than my mind
> May some day grasp a knife, unloose a vial,
> Or with a little leaden ball unbind
> The cords that tie me to the rank and file. (187)

If he never actually did "unbind the cords that tied" him to all others, he does suggest, in this poem, that he was nevertheless familiar with the desperate and overwhelming passions which animate his tragic protagonist.

At this point, we may return to the question with which we began: Why focus on this particularly grim form of action? Why speak of the murder of children? The answer may be that

Cullen deliberately wished to explore the question of violence as an instrument of political action. Fully aware that any recourse to violence inevitably entails the death not only of children but of many other defenseless human beings, the bitterly disappointed black poet chose to dramatize the agony of a tormented soul torn between the desire to spare the innocent and the passion for revolution. If, in his everyday life, Cullen rejected violence, he nevertheless permitted himself to imagine a grandly ferocious character trapped between misery and revolt, who unapologetically chooses revolt.

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