CHAPTER 17

Cultural Imperialism and Infanticide in Pasolini's *Medea*

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Society devours its disobedient children.
PIER PAOLO PASOLINI[1]

The tradition of using Euripides' *Medea* to construct a politicizing voice is prominent in the twentieth century: as is well known, the Women's Suffrage League used Medea's opening speech at their rallies.[2] In more recent decades the sexual politics inherent in Euripides' play have been extended in various feminist adaptations, such as those by Franca Rame, Diana Wakoski, Tony Harrison, Christa Wolf and Cherríe Moraga. However, there is another body of politicizing Medeas that accentuate and develop the politics of Euripides' play: these emphasize the heroine as not only a sexual but also a cultural outsider, thus exploiting the narrative's potential for mounting a commentary on the aftermath of colonialism and what some critics have described as the 'double colonization' of foreign women.[3] Maxwell Anderson's *The Wingless Victory* (1936), for example, dramatizes the victimization of a Malay woman in nineteenth-century Salem, a woman acquired as a wife by an American opportunist during an expedition to the Far East and the South Seas. Similarly, Jim Magnuson's *African Medea* (1971) presents the difficult relationship of a west African woman with a white European colonialist in the Congo, a setting already imaginatively occupied by the narrative of Joseph Conrad's iconic anti-imperialist novella, *Heart of Darkness*. Brendan Kennelly's *Medea* (1989) provides a less overt commentary about empire but contains allusions to The Troubles of Northern Ireland, while the *Demea* of Guy Butler (1990) firmly positions Euripides' narrative within the colonialist legacy of South Africa's racial apartheid. More recently, Wesley Enoch's *Black Medea* (2005) used the Euripidean paradigm to explore the alienation and ongoing cultural displacement of Aborigines in contemporary Australia.[4]

In each of these versions the narrative of Euripides' *Medea* serves as a useful template for an exploration of colonial violence. While these representations further bear out the complex Euripidean characterization of Medea as both victim and aggressor, this essay puts forward the argument that the usefulness of the Medea narrative derives in particular from the symbolic and political significance of the heroine's infanticide.[5] While the play's signature act of infanticide may seem to epitomize Medea's aggressiveness, an act that some use to condemn her, it has a

symbolic meaning which is crucial to the politics of the narrative: it serves as a provocation that further politicizes the subjectivity of the social outsider. If the narrative of infanticide can be, and has been, interpreted in ways that suggest a demonization of the sexual and cultural Other,[6] it can also be represented in ways that foreground politicized contentions of subjectivity and cultural difference. As will be seen, Pier Paolo Pasolini's film version of Euripides' *Medea* is illustrative in this regard: it carefully frames Medea's infanticide against a narrative backdrop which comprises of commentaries on the symbolic violence colonialism inflicts on the subaltern subject — in the film epitomized by Medea[7] — and the operation of power in a society, as most strikingly depicted in the film's representations of human sacrifice.

The Golden Fleece and Cultural Imperialism

Pasolini's *Medea* places the Euripidean narrative within its broader, epic context. The first sections of the film present the mythical pre-history of Euripides' play: Giasone's (Jason's) tutelage under Cheiron; his coming of age and learning of his royal lineage; his confrontation with his wicked uncle Pelias; and his quest for the Golden Fleece, which brings him and his companions, the Argonauts, to the distant and barbaric land of Colchis. However, while Pasolini's *Medea* begins recounting the story that is now familiar to the Western world as 'Jason and the Argonauts',[8] the film frames the life of the mythical hero in a radically different way to the hero as conceptualized by other, more popular representations of the Greek myth.[9] The opening scenes depicting Cheiron's instruction to Giasone, for example, hardly prefigure a glorious destiny: the centaur is curiously nonchalant about the fact that he brought up Giasone by telling him lies. Cheiron says:

> Today you are five and I want you to know the truth about yourself. You're not my son and I did not find you in the deep [sea]. I told you a big lie. You are not a big liar, but I am. I love telling lies.[10]

This confession is even more peculiar because it is addressed to a five-year-old child, who merely looks on, apparently oblivious and without comprehension of the statement. And when Cheiron tells Giasone what he will need to do to claim his inheritance, he makes the point that his uncle Pelias will send him on a quest to 'a distant land across the sea', a quest which he explicitly describes as being used as a 'pre-text', a strategy to divert a direct claim to the throne from Giasone. To emphasize their tired, formulaic nature, the very words used by Cheiron are used by Pelias when the grown Giasone confronts him: Pelias promises to relinquish the throne on condition that Giasone bring back the Golden Fleece from 'a distant land across the sea'. The narrative's deliberate use of abstract formulas in the speeches of Cheiron and Pelias and, moreover, their blasé delivery, suggests a level of self-consciousness of the heroic quest genre, a self-consciousness that renders the narrative of Giasone's quest contrived, hackneyed and over-determined.

Taking its cue from Euripides' systematic deflation of Jason's heroic characterization, Pasolini's *Medea* subverts the celebrated quest narrative of the Argonautica by recasting it as a highly questionable colonialist adventure. Pasolini's *Medea*

renders the encounter between the Argonauts and Colchis as a violent, exploitative and shameless invasion. As Marianne McDonald points out, Giasone resembles a bandit.[11] When the Argonauts arrive in Colchis, they quickly proceed to steal horses with which they raid and pillage the peasant villages of the area. They are depicted as brazen; there is no questioning of their right to take the horses or to raid the Colchian houses: their self-assumed superiority licenses these acts.

The quest of Pasolini's Giasone is hardly a realization of a hero's 'destiny' or a politically innocent adventure of discovery of exotic lands — even assuming that such a thing is possible. In this respect, Pasolini's depiction of Giasone's quest is radically different from other, more conventional renderings of the story of Jason and the Argonauts. For example, the Victorian representations by Charles Kingsley and William Morris are, by comparison, breathtakingly conservative in their celebration of Jason as a heroic adventurer and their casting of Medea as a two-dimensional figure. Repeating the dominant paradigms of Victorian Era sexism and misogyny,[12] Medea becomes either a caricature of evil or a helpless maiden in need of a hero. In *The Heroes: or Greek Fairy Tales for my Children* (1855), Kingsley's re-telling of the Greek heroic myths for children, Medea simply becomes Jason's wicked wife: regarding the infanticide, the narrator says: 'It stands ever as a warning to us not to seek for help from evil persons, or to gain good ends by evil means.'[13] While the narrative paints Medea as the epitome of evil, it is at pains to establish that the acquisition of the Golden Fleece is the fulfilment of Jason's birthright: Jason even explicitly states to Aeetes that the Argonauts are not pirates.[14] However, while the opening passages suggest that there are nobler things than chasing wealth, the narrative explicitly advocates the service of Queen and country:[15] as if such service might somehow be separated from imperial interests in power, wealth and land-grabbing. While Kingsley may be better known as a progressive Victorian reformist, the narrative recalls, and arguably reinforces, imperialist attitudes towards foreign and exotic lands. If the narrative is, in part, overtly pedagogical ('don't accept gifts from evil people') — an agenda of the text made all the more acute by its intended child audience[16] — its implicit lesson is that the acquisition of cultural treasures from exotic lands can fulfil a destiny that should not be construed as a type of piracy: a point that surely mirrors the then-booming imperial museum industry and its acquisition of material artefacts in ways that may well seem, by today's standards at least, ethically questionable.[17]

Like Kingsley's 'Greek Fairy Tales', Morris's epic *The Trial and Death of Jason* (1867), as the title implies, valorizes the heroic narrative of Jason; consequently, instead of being a formidable, complex representation of the subaltern, Medea becomes, in the words of Margaret Atwood, a 'trembling pre-Raphaelite maiden'.[18] When she first meets Jason, Medea's face reddens, 'sweet with shame [...] and there went and came delicious tremors through her.'[19] While Medea has exhibited both masculine and feminine traits throughout much of her career in western literary culture, at the hands of William Morris she becomes über-feminine. The Fleece, for its part, also becomes romanticized: with its 'locks of gold' it becomes fetishized as a 'wonder of all lands'.[20] Despite the fact that Jason, greedily, plunges towards it to grasp it with his 'mighty hold',[21] the treasure hunting is not meant to be an endeavour of greed

as much as an idealized adventure, inspired by the pre-Raphaelite imagining of a medieval era of chivalry. While the Golden Fleece is represented as the prize to be won after meeting the onerous challenges set by King Aeetes, the romanticism — complete with mock-Chaucerian language and Victorian rhyming couplets — provides a cover and a licence for the appropriation of treasure that strictly speaking belongs to another. If, as Edward Said suggests, literary texts play an important role in forming imperial attitudes, references and experiences,[22] the Medeas of Kingsley and Morris would seem to be products of a historical moment that celebrates Empire and the idea of an imperial destiny, a celebration articulated through their privileging of the questing hero in foreign lands in ways that occlude or banish ethical questions regarding the right to enter and appropriate the cultural treasures of foreign lands in the first instance.

While the representations of Medea in the works of Kingsley and Morris are somewhat two dimensional, Pasolini's film reworks that narrative strategy by giving Giasone comparable treatment: for the first half of the film, at least, he effectively flattens the representation of Giasone while developing that of Medea. Pasolini's Giasone, and his crew of Argonauts, become symbols of colonialism and the traditional Jason story becomes a parable that emphasizes the evil or ethical bankruptcy of cultural imperialism. While different to its Victorian counterparts, it, too, has an almost didactic project: it is as if it says, 'Look how bad it is to raid foreign cultures — and note how the Jason narrative celebrates a type of cultural imperialism.' Pasolini's film, here, echoes Euripides' dissidence to received myths: it is as if, like the centaur's opening confession about his lies, the film is uncovering the shocking truth behind the celebrated mythological narratives of acquiring treasures from foreign lands.

Pasolini's film, ironically perhaps, draws upon the powerful and influential discourses of Victorian cultural evolutionism: the Colchians are represented as a society characterized by practices that are recognizably 'primitive' and 'archaic'. After the opening scenes of Giasone's education, long drawn-out sequences depict the Colchian agricultural community engaged in sacrificial ritual practices that recall James Frazer's classic proto-structuralist scenario of the 'Dying God'. In this ritual a young man is chosen as a representative of the god of vegetation and sacrificed to ensure the fertility and growth of crops.[23] The corresponding scenes in the film are gruesome: a seemingly subservient and willing semi-naked figure with a crown of wheat is painted and strapped to a cross before being ceremonially axed by the high priest. Body parts and blood are then collected by the Colchian community to nourish the land and ensure the fertility of crops. Medea is celebrant to this ritual and she is supported by a number of priests, each garbed in the icons of primitivism: they are dressed in animal furs, sport archaic jewellery and several wear animal horns as headdresses.

Whilst the Frazerian sacrificial scenario may be ahistorical and complicit with nineteenth-century misogyny, which associated men with civilization and women with the primitive,[24] the representation of this ritual in the film reproduces a powerful and influential construction of primitive society in the Western imagination, one that has been powerful and influential since at least the age of

expansion and that has, in whole or in part, supported it. By representing Colchian society as one that engages in ritual human sacrifice as part of its religious practice, the film exploits a key signifier of 'primitive society', a signifier that surely competes only with cannibalism in the colonialist imagination as a defining practice of an imagined primitive or archaic culture.[25] If Pasolini's barbarian culture is deliberately symbolic rather than realistic or historical — as he explicitly suggests[26] — then the film would seem to be reiterating this symbolism, not so much to reify or support it, but to depict how it operates: it is precisely by deeming other cultures primitive — that is, by reducing them to a symbol — that European imperialists license their projects of domination.

Given the film's emphasis on the colonial encounter, Medea's infatuation with Giasone becomes readable not only in terms of a personal passion but as a metaphor for the seductive power of the colonizer over the colonized, the first world over the third world, and — to borrow the terminology of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist, whose ideas informed so much of Pasolini's oeuvre — hegemonic structures over the subaltern.[27] Medea's infatuation with Giasone mirrors the persuasive influence or attractiveness of an economic or imperial power. Focalized through Medea, the camera lens eroticizes the athletic body of Giasone, played by the tanned, muscular Olympic medallist Giuseppe Gentile, an eroticization that is arguably part and parcel of the scene of the colonial encounter.[28] If that is so, the film arguably implies it is Giasone's cultural difference that makes him irresistible to Medea: the attraction is not only personal but cultural; Medea's heart is won over by not only Giasone, but by everything that Giasone represents.

In wake of this passion, Medea betrays — and soon loses — her Colchian identity. Medea betrays Colchis by orchestrating the acquisition of the Golden Fleece for Giasone; to do this, she persuades her brother to dismantle it from its sacred stand. Medea then rides in a chariot to Giasone with the Fleece and her brother, only to brutally axe her brother and scatter his body parts to delay her father's pursuit of her and the stolen Fleece. Again, Medea's betrayal of her family and culture is not simply or solely an expression of her passion for Giasone. Rather, Medea's betrayal of her culture, her acquisition of the Golden Fleece and her murder of her brother, are meant to be suggestive of the extraordinary things the seduced or converted colonial subject will do under the spell of the imperialist. To put it in the Gramscian Marxist terms that inform these representations, the imperialism here operates like consumer capitalism: it co-opts its subjects 'through an erosion of values which transforms them into willing participants in their own exploitation'.[29] The danger of the colonial situation as represented by the film is not just in overt oppression but in allurement. Medea, here, is allured to her detriment and to circumstances that will result in her oppression: she will become subsumed by the hegemony of which she is an only-too-willing victim.

The film represents the cost of Medea's facilitation of Giasone's quest-cum-imperialist-mission as devastating, tragic and violent. As a consequence of leaving her homeland, Medea becomes alienated, displaced and disoriented; indeed, in losing the relationship with the Colchian 'world' she knew, Medea effectively loses her identity. This is most dramatically depicted in the scene when Medea arrives on

Greek land and realizes her displacement: she paces the land in despair and screams out to the sun, earth, grass and stones to speak to her. She fails to hear their voices and she vocalizes her alienation, saying: 'I touch the earth with my feet but I do not recognize it! I look at the sun with my eyes but I do not recognize it!' With her alienation, Medea also loses her metaphysical and spiritual faculties, her sacred relationship with nature and what the film will later describe as her identity as an 'authentic' woman — that is, a Colchian woman, a subject of an archaic society. In effect, Medea's elopement with Giasone and her cultural displacement amount to a type of Faustian deal: in 'selling out' to Giasone, Medea loses her soul. The representation may be informed by a type of romantic nostalgia for pre-industrial peasant cultures and its equivalent Marxist nostalgia for pre-capitalist societies, but such narrative frameworks are necessary for the film to make its political point: the film asks us to acknowledge, and empathize with, the tragic violence of the colonial encounter, the alienation and dislocation that can accompany it and the arrogance that licenses it in the first instance. And while the film asks us to acknowledge colonial violence via a narrative that may seem overly paradigmatic and schematic — and admittedly, the film does not explore other, equally complex but less tragic outcomes arising from the situation of colonialism — the ethical project of the film remains clear.

The Nature of Infanticide

Pasolini's Medea is an alienated subject because she can not negotiate the shift into the Greek world, a world the film represents as absolutely, and irreconcilably, different to the world of Colchis. That difference was pivotal to the director's vision of the film: in relation to the oppositions in *Medea*, Pasolini said: 'I am not a Hegelian: there is indeed a thesis, the sacred, and an antithesis, the profane, but there is no synthesis, only juxtaposition.'[30] While Euripides' narrative may have represented Medea's cultural difference in ways that underscored her alterity to the social order, Pasolini's film develops Medea's foreignness, thus extending an aspect of her characterization that seems to have become emphasized since the production of Euripides play.[31]

Various post-Euripidean representations of Medea emphasize her foreignness. A well-known southern Italian vase, dated to the end of the fourth century BC, for example, depicts the final scene of Euripides' *Medea* and represents Medea in iconic Persian cap and dress escaping Corinth in the sun chariot.[32] Medea's explicitly marked foreignness is suggestive: it can be read, for example, in relation to the discourses of xenophobia that arguably have demonized the Oriental subject since antiquity, a demonization in part based on historical threats to Athens from Persia.[33] Certainly, the depiction is appropriate in so far as it accentuates her alien characterization as a site of anxiety, her embodiment of cultural anxieties about foreigners.

However, the Medea of antiquity is 'foreign' in more ways than one: she is not only culturally different but, as the depiction on the Italian vase reminds us, she is also of another order of being. Medea is from an other world as well as from *the*

Otherworld. The depiction on the vase alludes to Medea's magical and supernatura powers to command the sun, her divine ancestry and her affiliation with the gods These signifiers of Medea's otherness — some cultural, some metaphysical — intersect and reinforce each other. Pasolini's *Medea*, like certain other anti-colonia Medeas, finds in representations of metaphysical and spiritual traditions a powerfu way to depict cultural difference. Such traditions are typically represented as being at odds with the types of rational secularism that have become hegemonic in th West.[34] And the episode that usually makes this point most clear is that for whicl the Medea narrative is best known: the infanticide.

What this essay would like to suggest is that cultural difference provides a contex for raising the possibility of sanctioned infanticide, a possibility — inherent i Euripides's play — which, first, challenges and problematizes the contention that i is an unnatural or otherwise gratuitous, evil act; and, second, politicizes the way in which subjectivity is defined. Read within the context of cultural differenc provided by Pasolini's film, infanticide becomes a dramatic provocation tha questions who determines what is natural and unnatural, as well as who counts as rights-bearing subject and, its corollary question, what counts as criminal murde In other words, the representation of sanctioned infanticide opens up the ideologica nature of subjectivity: the contention that if a subject does not enjoy rights-bearin subjectivity — for example, if they do not enjoy the right to live — then thei murder can hardly constitute a crime or transgression.

A subject's rights, including a subject's right-to-life, are never immediatel obvious or natural: they are determined by social structures.[35] That is why for example, infanticide has been tolerated in certain historical and cultura circumstances. Indeed, it seems that infanticide has been practised in most culture Western or otherwise, at some point in their history, as the work of anthropologist historians and commentators such as Larry Milner makes clear.[36] That may seer surprising or shocking: after all, it is difficult to think about infanticide outside th dominant paradigms of Humanism, and indeed Romanticism, that inform liber democracy, or outside an increasing and culturally pervasive sentimentalization c the child. However, children, like all subjects, are defined and construed with righ in varying ways at different historical moments.[37]

It is precisely the question of how society determines subjectivity that is unde investigation in Pasolini's film, an investigation that becomes most provocative i its representation of infanticide. The religious context of Pasolini's film complicate the reading of Medea's infanticide as the result of, for example, excessive passio it escapes this interpretative closure through the narrative framework of cultur difference and ritual sacrifice as painstakingly represented in the first half of th film. In the manner of so many of the works in Pasolini's oeuvre, *Medea* attemp to provoke us: here, Medea's infanticide is represented as if it were in alignmer with a Colchian conception of world order and practices of ritual human sacrific The 'murder' of Medea's children, like that of the representative of the god c vegetation in the earlier scenes of the film, is portrayed as a ritualized, religiou murder: a sacrifice. The washing of the children in a cauldron before their murd recalls the ritualistic practice of cleaning the sacrificial subject; similarly, whe

Medea lays their bodies out on their bed, she dresses them in white, a classic colour for sacrificial victims. The distinctive music which served as the soundtrack to the scenes of human sacrifice is repeated and, as noted by Naomi Greene, the knife that Medea used to kill the children inevitably recalls the sacrificial weapon of the ritual sacrifice in the first section of the film.[38] The murders are also framed by cosmological references: they are preceded by a silent prayer to the moon and the scene of sacrifice closes with a shot of the sun, a scene which recalls earlier ones in which Medea directly converses with the sun god. Further, the repetition of Medea's actions upon each child and the timing of their murder at their 'bed-time' also have connotations of ritual: what was the children's bed-time ritual now becomes their death ritual, enacted under the presidency of Medea, their mother as well as the representative of the Great Mother. Pasolini's Medea, then, like the archaic goddess she serves, wields the power of life and death in accordance with a particular cosmological order that is meant to be fundamentally Other and cyclical rather than linear.[39] Medea enacts a ritual outside the ambit of the cultural practices and social order of Corinth but possibly allowable, justified or sanctioned within the type of cultural traditions and religious practices attributed to Colchis.

The significance of Pasolini's representation of the infanticide as a type of religious ritual lies in its implicit commentary on the ways in which power becomes organized in society. Medea's power over her children recalls her powers over life and death in the Colchian religion, the point being that this power is socially inscribed: the structure of Colchian society provides for the royal family, and particularly Medea, to preside over the ritual of human sacrifice. As a member of the royal family and as a priestess of the Great Mother, Medea has an institutional role in that particular religious rite. By virtue of belonging to the royal house, Medea belongs to an elite class, a point emphasized in the film by several distinctive representations of the royal family in which they appear hieratic, static and framed, as if they were the sacred icons of a state cult. Such representations contrast with those of the peasants, who were usually depicted as humble and meek. The representations illustrate, essentially, a Marxist idea about how power is organized in a society by structures of class; the implicit logic of the Gramscian Marxism informing these representations is that the royal family, as the dominant class, establishes its authority by either rallying consensus or otherwise imposing authority through coercive measures: that is, by its hegemony.

If the representation of the royal family of Colchis suggests the brutal possibilities of hegemony, its potential to impose violence on victims who are sometimes only too willing (as is the case with the sacrificial victim), then the representation of the operations of power in the Greek city states of Iolcus and Corinth invites comparison. When Giasone returns to the court of Pelias with the Golden Fleece, Pelias asserts his rights as the king, the supreme head of power in Iolcus. He tells Giasone: 'You are faced today with a surprise, the most evident proof that no king is obliged to maintain his promises.' Pelias thus exercises his sovereign right to wield power arbitrarily, a naturalized right that arises by virtue of his office. Similarly, King Creon enjoys the sovereign right to banish a subaltern subject like Medea; indeed, following Euripides, he presumably also enjoys the right to threaten her with

punishment and death if she disobeys him — a type of arbitrary and discretionary power whose brutality is not diminished by Creon's mock-generous grant of allowing Medea to stay another day in his kingdom. Medea's encounter with King Creon, like Giasone's encounter with King Pelias, illustrates and emphasizes the Marxist contention that social structures always serve the ruling elite, defining and determining the rights of kings and subjects as if they were natural and, moreover, defined by them in the first instance.

The Marxist preoccupation with the social organization of power was prefigured to some extent by Euripides' play, most obviously in Medea's opening speech to the women of Corinth. In it, Medea offers a systematic critique of the subjugated position of women in ancient Greek society through, amongst other things, the institutions of dowry and marriage. While the speech is certainly open to a Marxist-inflected feminist interpretation — particularly in the ways in which it construes woman as a subordinate or subaltern class — Euripides' opening speech also alludes to the ways in which foreigners are positioned. Medea complains that she is a refugee without family ties upon which to draw and 'thought nothing of by [her] husband — something he won in a foreign land.'[40] Her comment alludes to the trafficking of women in the ancient Mediterranean world;[41] and Medea seems to see herself as some kind of exotic trophy wife. The point, however, is that Medea occupies a subjugated position and that particularly organized social structures, institutions and widely held values and beliefs (ideologies) construct her subjectivity in this way: she is obliged to submit to the hegemonic structures of a society that systematically disempowers both women and foreigners.

In Marxist analyses of society, the order of things — the ways in which power is organized amongst social groups or classes — is supported by ideology. In this respect, it is no accident that Pasolini's film is concerned with distinguishing between 'nature' and 'the natural', concepts which are typically read as agents of ideology in Marxist analyses. In the final moments of Giasone's education, Cheiron makes the cryptic and ominous comment: 'There is nothing natural in nature [...] remember that! The day nature seems natural to you, it means the end, and the beginning of something else. Goodbye sky, goodbye sea!' While the statement may seem like an insoluble riddle, the comment foreshadows the problematics of Medea's infanticide in the way it disrupts certain discourses of nature and the natural in regards to how a mother should act and feel as well as to how the 'natural world' operates. That Medea's murders go against conventional ideas of what it means to be a parent — and, moreover, a mother — is precisely the point. The representation of infanticide, placed within the film's philosophizing over the distinction between 'nature' and 'the natural', invites interpretation: most notably, it invites a questioning of ideas concerning infanticide that have been taken as natural, obvious and given: ideas that are, in fact, ideologies.

The representation in the film of Medea's archaic religion frames her infanticide in a way that allows it to be read along the lines of two conflicting paradigms regarding nature: one concerns the natural world, the other concerns mothers. While Medea's murder of her children may be considered 'unnatural' by virtue of Medea being a mother (the commonplace but unmistakably ideological contention

that no mother would do such a thing), her infanticide is represented as being continuous with another, competing idea about nature. As a human mother, Medea is 'naturally' expected to nurture her children; but because Medea is also a priestess of the Great Mother ('Mother Nature'), the authority of Nature ordains her to inflict death. Medea's murder of her children becomes, in effect, akin to the agricultural sacrifice of the vegetation god shown in the opening shots of Colchis: they are not so much 'unnatural' as *too natural*. In Pasolini's film, then, Medea's infanticide is shocking not only because it is an act of murder upon ostensibly innocent subjects; Medea's infanticide is also shocking because it seems to be sanctioned by its religious context, in which Medea legitimately wields the powers of the Great Mother in bringing life to meet its 'natural' destiny, death. The link between Medea as a human mother and Medea as a representative of the Great Mother thus enables an inversion and displacement of the discourses that construct both the maternal and the natural. The film displaces the idea of the 'natural' mother who refrains from murdering her children with a figure of 'Mother Nature' that periodically sacrifices her 'children'. Indeed, it could be argued that the 'meanings' attached to nature, the natural and the maternal effectively become 'deconstructed' in Pasolini's *Medea*: the film foregrounds the paradoxical and discontinuous meanings attached to each of these ideas. To put it in the terms of Derridean deconstruction, the idea of the 'natural' mother defers to and is contradicted by the idea of 'mother nature', a deference and contradiction which recall poststructuralist ideas about the instability or indeterminacy of meaning in language.[42]

It is significant that in Pasolini's film Medea's infanticide becomes embedded in a web of contradictory meanings attached to the ideas of nature, the natural and the maternal: this is not just a curious but irrelevant web of deferred meanings or significations. If Derridean deconstruction is at risk of promoting quietism, as certain detractors of his work suggest,[43] the deconstruction invited by Pasolini's representation of maternal infanticide invites a politicized reading about the discourses that constitute and inform the social order. Medea's infanticide is not only embedded in a meaning-making yet contradictory web of *différance*, it is also embedded in discourses of alterity and cultural difference that are represented as socially determined and which, moreover, have serious political implications. Placed within this framework, the idea of maternal infanticide as (for example) an unnatural act becomes not so much a natural assumption as a natural*ized* assumption brought about by institutionalized discourses concerning subjectivity. It is, in the end, society that naturalizes and gives credence to the idea of the abnormality (or otherwise) of maternal infanticide,[44] just as it may naturalize and give credence to other forms of violence: whether that be the banishment of foreigners or indeed their execution. These are all forms of violence that the Medea narrative exploits to not only propel its drama but also to construct its commentary on the sanctioned violence of hegemonic social structures.

Pasolini's film underscores the violence that social institutions and discourses can enact by virtue of the 'naturalness' with which they constitute the order of things. The idea of the implicit violence of the social order was prefigured by Euripides' play, most obviously in its representation of the symbolic violence inflicted on

Medea as a foreign woman, and thus as a subject who has ostensibly been subjected to a type of 'double colonization'. More provocatively — and problematically — Euripides' play alludes to the idea of sanctioned violence through its depiction of Medea's infanticide as if it were sanctioned by, or at least symbolically contained within, religious expiation rituals.[45] This representation, as suggested in this essay's interpretation of Pasolini's film, is not simply a perverse representation or a reversal of accepted beliefs: it is also a provocation. To be sure, in both Euripides' and Pasolini's rendering of the Medea narrative, the infanticide is in part an aesthetic and dramatic provocation; but, as argued here — and particularly when placed within the type of Marxism informing Pasolini's oeuvre — the infanticide also operates as a political provocation. Pasolini's *Medea* takes up the cue from Euripides' play and, in emphasizing Medea's cultural difference, not only politicizes the colonialist politics to which the narrative speaks, but also gestures towards a type of cultural relativism which politicizes the discourses that define subjectivity, locating them within particular social structures and contexts. So, just as Creon can threaten banishment and, indeed, murder by virtue of his sovereign right, Medea, by virtue of her Colchian status, can preside over rituals of human sacrifice, including, it seems, the sacrifice of her children.

Thus, in the end, the representation of Medea's infanticide in Pasolini's film is not simply a glib affirmation of cultural difference or cultural relativism; rather, it is a highly politicized warning, a frightening affirmation of the possibilities of sanctioned violence. Its point is that the violence inflicted by Medea on others should not overshadow the types of violence that are inflicted on the sexual and cultural underdog, as typified by Medea's predicament: this is, admittedly, a risk in casting Medea as the perpetrator of infanticide. That risk is, however, also at the heart of the dramatic tension of Euripides' play and the complex representation of its heroine and her predicament: a complexity that makes the ancient play and modern adaptations by the likes of Pasolini all the more compelling.

Notes to Chapter 17

1. Bernhart Schwenk & Michael Semff, *P.P.P.: Pier Paolo Pasolini and Death* (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2005), p. 196.
2. See Edith Hall, 'Medea and British Legislation before the First World War: Medea the Suffragette', *Greece and Rome*, 46 (1999), 42–47.
3. Such criticism derives from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's classic essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in which she argues, 'If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow'. See *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–353.
4. Some of these examples are cited in Sarah Iles Johnston, 'Introduction', in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*, ed. by James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 4. Excellent overviews of modern versions and productions of Euripides' play appear in Fiona Macintosh, 'Introduction', *Medea in Performance, 1500–2000*, ed. by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Oliver Taplin (Oxford: Legenda, 2000), pp. 1–32; and Lillian Corti, *The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), pp. 177–220.
5. For ease of expression, the term 'infanticide' is used here as shorthand for the murder of infants as well as children. On the proliferating terminology used to characterize particular types

of infanticide, such as 'neonaticide', 'pedocide', 'libericide', 'progenicide' and 'filicide', see Larry Milner, *Hardness of Heart/ Hardness of Life: The Stain of Human Infanticide* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), p. 16; and Mark Jackson, 'The Trial of Harriet Vooght', in *Infanticide: Historical Perspectives on Child Murder and Concealment, 1550–2000*, ed. by Mark Jackson (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 1–17 (p. 11).

6. See Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled: Euripides and the Traffic in Women* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 146.
7. This essay uses the term 'subaltern' as appropriated by postcolonialist criticism from Antonio Gramsci's work, where it refers to a subordinate class, excluded from the social order and without a place from which to speak. In the context of postcolonial criticism, the 'subaltern' refers to the colonial subject in so far as they constitute an oppressed or silenced group whose political agency is in question. See Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?'; and Vinayak Chaturved, *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London: Verso, 2000). While Medea has a voice in Euripides' play, it is explicitly construed as that of a cultural and sexual outsider whose rights are marginalized by the social order: it is in this sense that this essay defines her as a subaltern subject.
8. While this narrative of maritime adventure predates the Homeric *Odyssey*, the only comprehensive version to survive is the post-classical version by the Alexandrian writer usually known as Apollonius of Rhodes. See *The Argonautika: The Story of Jason and the Quest for the Golden Fleece*, trans. by Peter Green (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).
9. For example, the film version of the Jason myth directed by Don Chaffey, *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963); and the 2000 TV-film of the same name by Ted Willing. For a discussion, see Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 112–15.
10. The basis of this analysis is formed by *Medea*, dir. by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1969), DVD: Costa Messa: Vanguard Cinema, 2004.
11. Marianne McDonald, *Euripides in Cinema: The Heart Made Visible* (Philadelphia, PA: Centrum, 1983), p. 9.
12. See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) as well as the classic, if dated, feminist study by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).
13. Charles Kingsley, 'The Argonauts', in *The Heroes: or Greek Fairy Tales for my Children* (1855; repr. London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 158.
14. Charles Kingsley, 'The Argonauts', p. 109. This is despite the accusation of piracy against the Argonauts that occur in relation to some of their other adventures.
15. Charles Kingsley, 'The Argonauts', pp. 61–62.
16. On the inculcation of social values in children through story-telling, see Jack Zipes, *Happily Ever After: Fairy Tales, Children, and the Culture Industry* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
17. See, for example, Jeanette Greenfield, *The Return of Cultural Treasures* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
18. See Margaret Atwood, 'Introduction' to Christa Wolf, *Medea: A Modern Retelling*, trans. by John Cullen (London: Virago, 1999), p. xii.
19. William Morris, *The Trial and Death of Jason* (1867); republished as *The Life and Death of Jason* (London: Dent & Sons, 1911), p. 103.
20. Morris, p. 133.
21. Ibid.
22. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. xii.
23. See James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* ([1890]; repr. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 1990), pp. 264–392.
24. See Diane Purkiss in *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 34.
25. On cannibalism, see *Cannibalism and the Colonial World*, ed. by Francis Barker, Peter Hulme and Margaret Iversen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
26. Naomi Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 129. It should be noted that the scenes shot in Medea's home land, 'Colchis', were

filmed in Cappadocia, central Turkey, and used 'real' Third World subjects to perform the p of the Colchians: the suggestion is that the film alludes to Turkey as the subject of the imperia gaze of the First World. However, as Maurizio Viano argues, despite this apparent specific *Medea* is more easily viewed as an abstraction of Western colonialism. See *A Certain Reali Making Use of Pasolini's Film Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 19 p. 243.

27. In Gramsci's Marxist theory, hegemony refers to the dominant paradigms that order a soci and which are believed to serve the interests of the ruling classes. The dominant class impo its power or 'hegemony' on the lower or subaltern classes not only through coercion through co-opting active support, creating consensus and social stability despite oppression exploitation. On the influence of Antonio Gramsci on Pasolini's work, see Greene, pp. 54–
28. See Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (New York: Routled 1995).
29. Ben Lawton, 'Why Add "Repudiation"?', in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 2nd (Washington: New Academia Publishing, 2005), p. x.
30. *Pier Paolo Pasolini*, ed. by Paul Willemen (London: BFI, 1977), p. 68.
31. It is thought that only after the production of Euripides' play was Medea represented as Oriental. See Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-definition through Tragedy* (Oxfo Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 35.
32. See Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Medea as a Shifting Distance: Images and Euripid Tragedy', in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*, pp. 267–69.
33. Indeed, Edward Said traces the legacy of modern Orientalism to Homeric Greece; *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978; r London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 56–58.
34. For example, the African traditions of voodoo are used in Ernest Felita's *Black Medea* Steve Carter's *Pecong*; for a discussion, see Kevin J. Wetmore, *Black Dionysus: Greek Tra and African American Theatre* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2003), pp. 163–89. Similarly, We Enoch's *Black Medea* represents the ancestral traditions of a particular aboriginal people; f discussion see Ivar Kvistad, 'Mapping the Australian Archaic: Reflections on Black Medea' *UNAUSTRALIA*, ed. by Jennifer Craik & Paul Magee (Canberra: Cultural Studies Associat of Australasia, 2006), pp. 1–12. <http://www.unaustralia.com/electronicpdf/Unkvistad.pdf
35. See *Freedom and Interpretation*, ed. by Barbara Johnson (New York: BasicBooks, 1993) for a ra of critical analyses of subjectivity and human rights.
36. Milner's *Hardness of Heart/Hardness of Life* offers a painstaking account of the practice infanticide across the world, continent by continent, across most historic periods. While work is ambitious, it is persuasive in its argument that infanticide has been a practice in n cultures at certain historical moments.
37. Anne Higonet and Philippe Ariès offer comparable accounts of the shifting valuing of the c in Western cultural history. Higonet emphasizes Romanticism in the rise of the value of child in Western discourse: see *Pictures of Innocence* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), By contrast Ariès emphasizes the rise of the bourgeois nuclear family: see *Centuries of Childh A Social History of Family Life*, trans. by Robert Baldick (London: 1960; repr. Harmondswo Penguin, 1973), esp. pp. 395–99. (Original: *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime* (P 1960)). On the Enlightenment notion of the rights-bearing subject, albeit in relation to representations of the human foetus, see Nathan Stormer, 'Prenatal Space', *Signs: Journ Women in Culture and Society*, 26, 1 (2000), 109–44.
38. Greene, p. 166.
39. As well as being inspired by the work of James Frazer, Pasolini was influenced by the i of Mircea Eliade regarding the cyclical time that supposedly informs primitive societies. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return: Or, Cosmos and History* (New York: Princ University Press, 1971), p. 112. For a speculative study of the relationship between Me infanticide and the figure of the Great Mother, see Nancy Tuana, 'Medea: With the Eyes of Lost Goddess', *Soundings*, 68, 2 (1995), 253–72.
40. Rex Warner, 'The Medea', in *Euripides I: Four Tragedies*, ed. by David Grene and Richm Lattimore (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago, 1955), p. 67.

41. For a general analysis of Euripides' plays and the trafficking of women, see Rabinowitz, *Anxiety Veiled*. However, it should be noted that Rabinowitz reads Euripides' *Medea* as supporting or 'reinforcing' the traffic in women; see p. 125.
42. See Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978) for the Derridean practice of 'deconstruction' as a critical practice of identifying and mapping out deferrals of signification. (First published as *L'Écriture et la différence* (Paris: Seuil, 1967)).
43. For example, see Terry Eagleton, 'Marxism without Marxism: Jacques Derrida and the Specters of Marx' (1995), in *The Eagleton Reader*, ed. by Stephen Regen (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 246–59.
44. Infanticide, here, is an ideal vehicle for exposing such sexual ideologies along feminist lines: after all, it is precisely the ideologies of sexuality constructing the maternal subject that have been exposed by feminist criticism with its recognition that women generally, and mothers in particular, do not necessarily 'naturally nurture'. See, for example, Patrice DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood* (London: Routledge, 1999); the classic Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (New York: Norton, 1986); Ann Dally, *Inventing Motherhood* (London: Burnett, 1982); and Elisabeth Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood* (London: Souvenir, 1981).
45. See the passage in which Medea refers to the expiation rites in the Temple of Hera Akraia. See Rex Warner, 'The Medea', p. 106.

Unbinding Medea

Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Classical Myth from Antiquity to the 21st Century

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