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MEDEA THE FEMINIST

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the phenomenon of a mythical figure, chiefly known as the murderess of her own children, becoming an icon of feminism. Euripides' *Medea* is the origin of *Medea's* impact through the ages. Thus the seeds of *Medea* as feminist are sown in the Greek tragedy. Subsequently, later depictions of *Medea* are examined to see in what respects they may be regarded as feminist. The works considered are those of Albee, Harrison, Cardinal, Kennelly, Crossland, Wolf, Lochhead, Labute, Nick, and Wakoski.

Medea has become one of the figures of Greek mythology who speaks most directly to our age. Not only have there been dozens of productions of *Medea* dramas in different parts of the globe every year for the past decades,¹ but the attention of scholars to this figure and to the reception of *Medea* in the modern world has also been noticeable in recent years. In addition to numerous academic articles, and the monographs of McDermott (1989) and Corti (1998), Princeton University Press in 1997 published a volume with the title *Medea – Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy and Art*, while the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, founded at the University of Oxford in 1996, devoted its first conference in July 1998 to *Medea*. The papers delivered at this conference, as well as some written for the volume, were published in late 2000 as *Medea in Performance 1500-2000*.² A seminar held in Urbino in 1998 on *Medea* in literature and art led to another publication in 2000: *Medea nella letteratura e nell'arte*.³

The enduring interest in *Medea* must be ascribed to the fact that modern audiences, readers and artists find that her story has a certain resonance with the modern world. Writing about the continuing practice of

¹ See Gowen 2000.

² Hall, Macintosh & Taplin 2000.

³ Gentili & Perusino 2000. I have not been able to consult this volume, but there is a useful review by J.J. Clauss in the *BMCGR*: <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/bmcgr/last> accessed 28/8/2002.

modern writers to reflect their themes by way of Greek mythology, George Steiner remarks, 'The incensed hurt of women continues to find voice via Medea.'⁴ This is true, but modern plays, films, operas, novels and poems based on the Medea myth⁵ reveal that for the modern world Medea can be made to represent not only betrayed women, but also oppressed racial groups, exploited colonials and women. These themes have all been developed from Euripides' *Medea* which fundamentally influenced all subsequent versions of the myth, whether by imitation or reaction. They are an elaboration of Medea as barbarian, an outsider in the Greek world and a woman dishonoured by her husband. Modern works of art expand the application of these themes to the exploitation of less developed countries and peoples by the first world, and the subjection and marginalisation of non-White peoples by Whites.⁶ But perhaps the most frequently explored theme is that of the subjugation and domination of women by men. It is in this last case that Medea has become a symbol for women and an icon of feminism.⁷

Some of these interpretations by modern artists may not be acceptable to classical scholars. There are, for instance, considerable differences of opinion about interpreting Euripides' *Medea* as a feminist drama. Gilbert Murray, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford University, noted about Euripides in 1913: 'To us he seems an aggressive champion of women; more aggressive, and certainly far more appreciative than Plato. Songs and speeches from the *Medea* are recited to-day at suffragist meetings.'⁸ Bernard Knox, another illustrious scholar, pithily dismissed the feminist reading: 'The *Medea* is not about woman's rights; it is about woman's wrongs, those done to her and by her.'⁹ This diversity in interpreting Euripides' *Medea* is

⁴ Steiner 1984:129.

⁵ For adaptations of the Medea material, see Reid 1993:643-50; Mimoso-Ruiz 1980; Claus & Johnston 1997; Hall, Macintosh & Taplin 2000; Van Zyl Smit 1987.

⁶ See Mimoso-Ruiz 1980:139-96; Van Zyl Smit 1987:154-224 and Van Zyl Smit 1992.

⁷ The term 'feminism' is used rather broadly in this paper. It indicates women's awareness that they are unequally treated by men. It seldom goes as far as demanding the same rights as men, but the implication is that women should be treated equally. Medea's example in the versions discussed in this paper is of two kinds. In some versions, she is shown as killing her children, but the moral responsibility rests with Jason. In others, the children are killed, but not by Medea. However, because of the machinations of men, the murder is ascribed to her.

⁸ Murray 1913:32.

⁹ Knox 1977:211.

well summarized by John Harrison: 'Those wishing to discuss Euripides' own views on women can, in fact, find passages in *Medea* to support the view both that he was a proto-feminist and a misogynist.'¹⁰

Knox is correct that the Greek tragedy cannot simply be interpreted as advocating women's rights, but this is the approach that many modern artists have chosen.¹¹ They have often elected to simplify the nuances of the ancient drama and have produced adaptations dominated by the ideas that they want to convey to their modern audience. A statement by the Algerian-born feminist writer Marie Cardinal, who translated Euripides' *Medea* into French, about who or what the 'true' Medea is, makes the point very clearly: 'Truth is not in the least important here, Medea is a myth. Besides the truth about Medea cannot ever be known, even admitting that there may be one. Let's speak about reality rather than about truth. For all the Medeas are true. They all contain the truth of those who tell them; that is what is interesting in the study of myths. Each interpretation is significant for a period, for an idea. These fables say more about the evolution of humanity than most historical documents.'¹²

This paper thus proposes to examine the elements in Euripides' *Medea* that are most likely to lead to an interpretation of the drama as a feminist work.¹³ Then a number of modern feminist versions based on the Medea myth will be analysed to attempt to show how they relate the mythic material to the modern world.

The first aspect of Euripides' drama that is relevant to seeing her as a typical woman is that, at the opening of the play, she is a woman betrayed by the man she loves and for whom she has made considerable sacrifices. The sympathy with her lot shown by the Nurse and the Chorus of

¹⁰ 2000:26.

¹¹ For 19th century feminist productions and adaptations of *Medea*, see Macintosh 2000, especially 17-19; and for the 19th century and early 20th, Hall 1999.

¹² Cardinal 1987:169 (my translation).

¹³ Jennifer March (1990:32-33) is right to warn that scholars should not take passages or characters in Euripidean drama out of their context when trying to establish Euripides' attitude to women. However, audiences, readers and artists do not always judge texts so dispassionately.

Corinthian women establishes her as a typical representative of her sex.¹⁴ Her experience is portrayed as one that any woman may suffer. A comparison between this relationship of protagonist and Chorus with the relationship between Seneca's Medea and the Chorus immediately throws into relief the hostility to Medea in the latter play. Seneca's Chorus support Jason. They sing a gracious hymn for his new wedding (56-115) and pray for his safety (595-96, 668-69), but they recoil in horror from Medea and her plans (362, 849-73). The isolation of this Medea from her fellow human beings precludes her from representing the fate of ordinary women.

One of the most striking aspects of Euripides' drama is that he made Medea credible as a woman. She is not a witch, but for most of the drama she is portrayed as a woman accepted as their peer by other women and supported by their solidarity with her cause. Even Jason's treatment of her, his deception and his planning of her future without consulting her, in keeping with the contempt for the female sex shown by him, mark her as an ordinary woman. Medea knows the position of ordinary women. This is famously apparent in her great 'Women of Corinth' speech.¹⁵

When Medea first 'leaves the house' (214), she already has the sympathy of the Corinthian women because she has been abandoned by her husband. They want to comfort her in her distress. When Medea addresses them, however, she is calm and delivers a rational speech that reflects not only her own position, but the general situation of women. She describes the unequal position of women. A woman has to provide a dowry for a husband who takes control of her body. A woman has to adapt to her husband's expectations and has no recourse when he abandons her. Medea boldly asserts that women's life requires more courage than that of men. She compares giving birth to fighting in war and says that the former requires more courage. This has rightly been called 'the most famous feminist statement in ancient literature.'¹⁶

The Chorus support Medea so strongly that they do not protest against her threats of violent revenge, but promise to be silent. Even after Medea

has secured a day's delay of her exile from Creon and speaks of specific deeds of vengeance, a triple murder, the Chorus do not attempt to restrain her. Instead, the first Choral ode is devoted to the faithlessness of men, thus underlining the injustice suffered by women.

In the first scene between Medea and Jason, his insensitive and selfrighteous tone accords with Medea's earlier picture of male dominance and disregard of women's rights. Her confrontation with him shows, not only in the contents of her speech, but also in its style, that a woman is able to hold her own in the man's world of rhetoric. She lists the many debts Jason owes her. Jason's response is patronising: he accuses Medea of sexual jealousy and shows general misogyny. It is not surprising that the Chorus stay on Medea's side after this scene. Only when they learn of her plan to murder her children do they realize that she is, after all, not like them in every respect and they try to dissuade her from the unnatural deed.

Medea cleverly exploits Jason's idea of the stereotype of a wife in the way she plays the submissive woman in her second meeting with Jason. Her true womanly nature comes to the fore in her love for her children, evident especially, and ironically, in the monologue (1019-80) where she summons up her courage to murder them.¹⁷

As the tragedy unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that Medea is no ordinary woman. In that regard a feminist view could be that she is driven to the unnatural act - the reversal of her role as nurturing mother - of killing her own children, by the harsh treatment she has received from the men who have some power over her, namely Creon and Jason. It could be argued that the men bear the moral responsibility for her act.¹⁸

The spectacular ending of Euripides' drama provides a further complication in the acceptance of Medea as an ordinary woman. No

¹⁷ Corti's statement, 'The tragedy of *Medea* may be read as a constant restatement of the wish that the children did not exist' (1998:33), seems to me a radical misinterpretation. It would negate the purpose of Medea's revenge if neither she nor Jason loved or attached importance to their children. For a cogently presented argument that it is precisely the conflict between Medea's passion for vengeance and her love for her children so compassionately portrayed by Euripides that is the essence of the tragedy, see March 1990:40-43.

¹⁸ In many of the feminist versions, Medea is exculpated. The murder is variously presented as euthanasia, Medea committing the murder while of unsound mind, or, the murder is transferred to other agents, as in the pre-Euripidean tradition.

¹⁴ See Foley 1989:73 for a description of the nuances of the relationship between Medea and the Nurse, and between Medea and the Chorus. She argues persuasively that the Chorus accept Medea as a helpless victim of her husband's desertion, while the Nurse remains uneasy about her dangerous temperament.

¹⁵ Eur. Med. 214-66.

¹⁶ Morwood 1998:171, notes to 230-51.

ordinary mortal has at her disposal a chariot drawn by dragons to transport her to a safe haven. Curiously, this aspect has provided few obstacles to modern adaptors of the tragedy, as shall be seen below. Foley (1989:77) likens the pattern of Medea's revenge to that of 'divine rather than human action.' I do not think it necessary to discuss here the further point that Foley raises about Medea's masculine, heroic side, as that is not an aspect taken up by the modern adaptors of Medea.

An instructive example of how a new interpreter could approach Euripides' tragedy is Marie Cardinal's version. Although Cardinal was not trying to write a new Medea drama, but was translating Euripides' *Medea*, her translation was inevitably coloured by her interpretation of the Greek play. Her reaction to the Greek text, noted in the preface to her translation and in the interview published as an epilogue, is a useful guide to subtle changes observable in her version, despite the claim that she wanted to stay as close as possible to the spirit of the original.¹⁹ Notable is her emphasis on the tragedy being one of a stranger, a woman who is isolated and whose jealousy thus grows more easily,²⁰ and on the fact that women – Medea, the Nurse and the Chorus – were pleading the same women's cause that women are still pleading.²¹ In her translation, Cardinal's emphasis on Medea as a woman and on the solidarity of women comes through. There is one exception to this solidarity – Jason's new bride. Cardinal introduces an element that I have not been able to find in the Greek text, when she has Medea in her first speech in the first meeting with Jason saying:

Mais comment peut-elle coucher avec toi, ta nouvelle
épousée! Comment peut-on faire l'amour avec un homme
dont la femme erre sur les grands chemins de la misère en
traînant ses enfants derrière elle! Mais comment peut-on

¹⁹ Cardinal 1987:162. See her comments in the Preface (32-41) on the difficulties of translating Euripides' text and her decision not to try to reproduce the metre of the original. For explanations of problems encountered in translating specific words and phrases, see 154-56.

²⁰ Cardinal 1987:21.

²¹ Cardinal 1987:42.

coucher avec un homme pareil!²²

Some of the other feminist adaptors of the drama, notably Crossland, have tried to change the role of Jason's bride so that she too becomes aware of the discrimination against women, while others (Albee, Wolf and Loch-head) have attempted to soften the character of Glauce/Creusa by making her express pity for Medea.

Cardinal has not strayed too far from Euripides, but small changes in emphasis highlight the opposition Medea-Jason, woman-man even more than in the original. For instance the choral ode (lines 204-12) is freely paraphrased as a strong statement of support for Medea,²³ which is affirmed after Medea's 'Women of Corinth' speech: 'Tu peux compter sur nous, Médée. Nous te donnons raison. Jason mérite d'être puni.'²⁴ The Chorus' next intervention (Eur. *Med.* 357-63) expresses, even more strongly than in the Greek, support for Medea, thus strengthening the impression of Medea as a wronged victim. This is emphasised again by Cardinal's effective rendering of the Chorus (lines 410-45) which is drastically shortened and culminates in a striking finale:

Médée abandonnée
bafouée
exilée.
Médée sans père
sans frère
sans terre
sans amant.

Pauvre Médée! Ton règne est fini, une autre femme a pris ta place
dans la maison!²⁵

After the first scene between Medea and Jason, the choral ode on the power of Aphrodite (lines 627-62) is drastically curtailed, but the women's conclusion powerfully encapsulates their sentiments:

²² Cardinal 1987:97.

²³ Cardinal 1987:77-78.

²⁴ Cardinal 1987:80.

²⁵ Cardinal 1987:91.

Médée, toi qui n'as plus de terre
 toi qui n'as plus de maison
 toi qui n'as plus d'amant
 Nous te plaignons!
 Jason, toi qui n'as pas de coeur
 toi qui n'as pas de reconnaissance
 Nous ne t'aimons pas
 Nous souhaitons ta mort.²⁶

A comparison with the Greek text will make it clear that the hostility they express towards Jason is stronger than in the original, while Cardinal's version here strikingly summarizes and contrasts the position of the woman and the man.

Because Cardinal's version is a translation, not an adaptation, she has not changed the outcome of the tragedy. Nevertheless, because of the accentuation throughout, especially by the Chorus, on the wrongs done to women by men, the audience at the end would not be unimpressed that Medea might be the perpetrator of the killing, but that Jason bears a large part of the guilt.

In a recent article, Edith Hall provides evidence that feminist interpretations of Euripides' *Medea* have a long history.²⁷ She describes how performances of the full text of Euripides' *Medea* in England in the early twentieth century coincided with an upsurge of public interest in the movement for women's suffrage. '*Medea* not only offered the authority of Classical drama to a contemporary cause, but can be understood ... as one of the founding dramas in the prolific genre of suffragette plays and songs which were placed before the public from 1907 onwards.'²⁸

Edith Hall mentions that, in this period, women began to give a more sympathetic hearing to women who had killed their children. The causes were sought in factors like social position and male irresponsibility, instead

of assuming that the women themselves must bear the full blame. She also adduces some evidence that productions of adapted *Medea* dramas in the 19th century had a certain impact on the reform of the Divorce Law in Britain.²⁹ However, Hall concludes that the real impetus to productions of *Medea* as part of the commercial theatre repertoire was given by the upsurge of feminism in the 1970s: 'When the story of *Medea*'s stage appearances in the late twentieth century comes to be written, it is certain that connections will be drawn between the upsurge of interest in Euripides' tragedy and the unprecedented success of feminism, reflected in Britain in legislative activity around sex discrimination, equal pay, equal opportunities, divorce, child custody, and, more recently, wives' retaliation against abusive husbands.'³⁰

Hall's paper refers mostly to productions of Euripides' text. But recent decades have also brought some strongly feminist versions of the *Medea* story, whether in the form of plays, poems, films or novels. Some of these have been productions of new translations of Euripides, but others are new works in which the artists aim to give their interpretation of the myth. The interpretation of the *Medea* as a feminist drama in the days of the suffragettes rested chiefly upon the quotation, often probably out of context, of *Medea*'s famous 'Women of Corinth' speech (lines 214ff. and especially lines 230ff.), but the new feminist versions seek to reinterpret the whole story in the context of the treatment of women and women's rights.

The first of these overtly feminist treatments was probably that written by Gloria Albee and performed at the Westbeth Playwrights Feminist Collective in New York City in January 1975. This script was not published, but one typescript copy is available in the library of the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts.

Significantly, Ms Albee prefaces her play by quoting from Robert Graves' *Greek Mythology* the reference to the Corinthian bribe of Euripides to absolve them of their guilt by pretending that *Medea* killed two of her own children. This is a sign that this is not *Medea* as she is generally expected. It is interesting that many of the feminist interpreters of *Medea* reach back to alternative versions of the myth which in most cases precede

²⁶ Cardinal 1987:104.

²⁷ Hall 1999:42-77.

²⁸ Hall 1999:44.

²⁹ Hall 1999:54-64.

³⁰ Hall 1999:72.

Euripides' canonical version.³¹

It quickly becomes apparent that Ms Albee presents Medea in a gentle light. In the first act it is revealed that she is not guilty of killing her brother, but loves and protects him. Jason is responsible for his death. This Medea is not a witch, but uses herbs for healing only. Nevertheless Jason manipulates her feelings so that she pretends to Pelias and his daughters that she is able to rejuvenate him. Jason succeeds in forcing Medea to do this because she really loves him and is afraid of losing him if she does not carry out his wishes. In Corinth, Jason has to serve a ten-year apprenticeship to win Glauce's hand and the kingship, but does not want to expel Medea until after he has married Glauce. Medea by now has seven children and is thoroughly disillusioned with men. She accuses Jason of furthering his career at her expense and cannot understand how he can abandon his children. His reply is that he knows that she will look after them. Then the bodies of two of the children are carried in. They have been stoned to death by the Corinthians who have been told that Medea is a witch and that she and her children are barbarians. Jason does acknowledge some measure of guilt, for, as Medea leaves, he asks her to forgive him. Women are thus seen as the victims of men, who take what they can from women they profess to love, but are prepared to sacrifice them when their careers are at stake. Women are portrayed as sensitive to others. Medea is characterized by her caring nature, and even Glauce is drawn with some sympathy as she expresses pity for Medea. Nevertheless, the one crime Medea does commit in this play is the murder of Glauce and her father, who both die because of a poisoned crown left by Medea as a gift. Yet when the play ends with Jason's discovery of the corpses and his horrified scream 'Medea!', the audience realize that Jason bears the guilt of having provoked this act by his treatment of a woman who loved and supported him.³²

Other feminist treatments leave Medea the agent of the crimes, but put the blame squarely on Jason. One of the most remarkable feminist versions

³¹ For other such examples, cf. the works of Crossland, Wolf, Harrison.

³² Another American work, the novel *Medea* by Miranda Seymour, is cast in the form of reflections upon Medea's eventful life. The Medea-Jason relationship is portrayed as, amongst other aspects, a struggle for political equality. Who actually killed the children is left to the reader's decision. There is uncertainty whether Medea was responsible or whether it was the Corinthian mob. This novel is an attempt to bring some nuances to the accepted version of Medea's past and at the same time to reflect on her role as woman.

is *Medea: A Sex-war Opera* by Tony Harrison.³³ This is the libretto of a work commissioned by the Metropolitan Opera in New York. The score by Jacob Druckman is incomplete and thus the full work has never been performed. Harrison's *Medea* is an extremely dense and complex work that embraces a number of quotations from other *Medea* dramas (such as those by Euripides, Buchanan, Corneille, Seneca, Hosidius Geta and Catulle Mendès) and from operas (by Cherubini and Cavalli [*Il Giasone*]). These works are cited in the original language and this adds to the effect of the 'sex-war' encompassing all peoples from time immemorial. To add to the complexity, Hercules is brought in as counterpart to Medea and shown to be a real child-murderer. There are two choruses, one male, one female, but they change many times: for instance, the women form a procession of wedding attendants, change to contemporary New Yorkers and, at other times, to women of Lemnos, Sirens, slave girls in Colchis and so on. No wonder that Oliver Taplin refers to this as a 'highly wrought and rather difficult script!'³⁴ Nevertheless, this is a groundbreaking adaptation, not least in the way it starts with Medea about to be executed in the electric chair for the murder of her children. By means of flashbacks, the history of Jason and Medea is presented, accompanied by the constant theme of the war between the sexes. It is impossible to unravel the intricacies of this work within a limited compass,³⁵ but one of its strengths is that in a direct and punchy style it forces the reader/audiences to reconsider the whole story from new angles: for example, the Chorus of Women when Medea is about to be electrocuted:

Remember when you hear her screams
that a woman goes to such extremes
when men abuse her ...³⁶

The following extract, also from the Women's Chorus, encapsulates the main theme:

Beneath all Greek mythology

³³ Harrison 1986.

³⁴ Taplin 1997.

³⁵ See the short discussion by Macintosh 2000.

³⁶ Harrison 1986:368.

are struggles between HE and SHE that we're still waging.

In every quiet suburban wife dissatisfied with married life is Medea, raging!³⁷

Another feminist revision is the Irishman Brendan Kennelly's adaptation of Euripides' text.³⁸ Kennelly makes it clear that his version was inspired by the rage of women. He writes: 'The Medea I tried to imagine was a modern woman, also suffering a terrible pain – the pain of consciousness of betrayal by a yupified Jason, a plausible, ambitious, articulate and gifted opportunist who knows what he wants and how to get it.'³⁹ Kennelly interprets Medea's acts as sentencing Jason to life (in both senses of the word). She has destroyed his world, but leaves him intact. This is, after all, not very different from what happens in the original.⁴⁰

Although Dagmar Nick stated in an interview published as an epilogue to her *Medea, ein Monolog*, that she was not interested in feminists,⁴¹ her Medea survives being abandoned by Jason and having her children taken from her and stoned. She now roams as an exile, while stories are spread that she killed her own children. This Medea does not ask for pity, she endures because she knows the truth. She also knows that the truth is often obscured by myths. She knows that she has created Jason the hero who rejoices in his reputation as conqueror of the Golden Fleece, while in reality he fainted from fear while she was busy removing the Fleece guarded by the serpent.⁴² Implicitly Ms Nick has created a Medea who is not out of place in the ranks of the feminists.⁴³

Euripides' Medea is fascinating because of the power of her love and the

³⁷ Harrison 1986:371.

³⁸ Kennelly 1991.

³⁹ Kennelly 1992:8

⁴⁰ For a discussion of Kennelly's *Medea*, see McDonald 1997.

⁴¹ Nick 1991:52.

⁴² Nick 1991:15.

⁴³ A more optimistic feminist revision of the Medea myth is a Dutch novel by Marie-Sophie Nathusius, *Medeia*. The author conflates three parts of the Medea myth set in Colchis, in

power of her hatred, because she refuses to become a victim. The modern Medeas devised by some feminists are often somewhat pale in comparison. A particular example of this is provided by the play *Collateral Damage*, subtitled *The Tragedy of Medea*.⁴⁴ The term 'collateral damage' was used during the 1991 Gulf War to describe the thousands of civilian deaths that resulted from the bombings in Iraq. I quote the words of the author of *Collateral Damage*, Jackie Crossland: '[T]he killing was shrugged off as an unavoidable consequence of the political and economic struggles over which those who died had no control. Similarly the women and children in this play are buffeted by circumstances over which they have no control. The tragic part of the story stems from this: a mother, Medea, is separated from her children by such circumstances and never gets to see them grow up.'⁴⁵ From this it is clear that the themes of this play extend beyond feminism, although feminist issues dominate.

The play is set in an East Vancouver kitchen filled with utensils and toys such as in any house with children. This background underscores the author's belief that Medea's story 'could be any woman's story'. The cast is essentially the same as in the Greek tragedy, but Aigeus is omitted, Medea's mother features as a ghost while Crayon's (sic) daughter, here called Princess, also has a speaking part. Ms Crossland's intention is that all the roles, including those of men, should be played by women, thus neatly subverting the practice in ancient Athens. Masks are to be used. This links with the idea that Medea is a woman's story with men presented as women see them.

The male characters are portrayed as rather seedy political adventurers and male chauvinists. They are in charge because of their physical strength. When Jason arrives in Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece, Medea has already been abused by her father and her brother and welcomes the chance of escape. Nevertheless, her opinion of Jason is not high: 'This Jason is not a clever man. But he is brave in the way that men are and handsome ... He pays more attention to his muscles than my conversation, which he does not seem to understand most of the time. But

Corinth and in Athens. Medea becomes a kind of earth mother and disappears into the blue yonder with her three children. This novel links Medea into a matriarchal society.

⁴⁴ Crossland 1992.

⁴⁵ Crossland 1992:9.

they say love is often like that and that a woman can't expect much.⁴⁶ Later in Corinth, Crayon gives the reason why Jason would be a suitable son-in-law thus: 'This boy is as thick as two planks, but nobody messes with him.'⁴⁷ The female characters are much more intelligent and show great solidarity with one another, but are nevertheless wronged and suppressed. For instance, in this play Jason kills Medea's brother, but Medea's father spreads the story that she was the murderer.

Further evidence of female striving for personal realization is provided by the character of Jason's intended bride. Princess is independent-spirited and does not wish to marry Jason when her father instructs her to do so. She reacts: 'I see what this means for me. I must marry this guy and start making babies to consolidate your position.'⁴⁸ Princess is forced by Crayon to marry Jason and he rapes her. When he falls asleep, she gets up, sets fire to the marriage-bed and goes to the women's temple where Medea has also sent her maid with the children. Crayon has the women's temple destroyed, but Princess as well as Medea's maid with the children manage to get away safely. The children are brought up by the maid who regrets that their mother does not know they are safe and well. Medea lives a lonely life, mourning for her children. In spite of this, 'stories were circulated about her wickedness and enchantments. They say she killed the king's daughter with poison and murdered her own children.'⁴⁹ This is, of course, the Euripidean version that has just been shown to be false. In contrast to the triumphant supernatural being at the end of the Greek drama, this woman has become a victim. The message of *Collateral Damage* is unambiguous: Men are unscrupulous in exploiting women to fulfil their every need. Even while fighting for survival, women will be accused of perpetrating vile crimes. It is thus fitting that the play should end with the message: 'Mothers make your daughters strong.'⁵⁰

The theme of cynical political expediency indicated by the title again comes to the fore in Crayon's strategy of choosing Jason as his son-in-law in order to have his military skill at his disposal. The way in which he plans to remove Medea also illustrates this: 'I was thinking that I could make a

⁴⁶ Crossland 1992:31.

⁴⁷ Crossland 1992:62.

⁴⁸ Crossland 1992:64.

⁴⁹ Crossland 1992:73.

⁵⁰ Crossland 1992:74.

law that foreigners couldn't live here. ... Or, if push comes to shove, we could just kill her. Whatever it takes.'⁵¹

The combination of all these themes makes this play a good example of how the Medea myth may be manipulated to conform to ideas that are acceptable to the politically sensitive in the modern world.

Another recent work that joins several themes in its interpretation of the Medea myth is the novel *Medea-Stimmen*⁵² by the renowned German author Christa Wolf, who was born in the German Democratic Republic and spent most of her life under the communist regime. Her novel is set in the ancient world, but in the Prologue Wolf explicitly points to the similarities between the ancients and us. She calls them 'fremde Gäste uns gleich'.⁵³ Thus the reader is invited to draw comparisons and apply conclusions to modern society.

By means of six voices from the past – Medea, Jason, Agameda (a former pupil of Medea who now hates her), Akamas (Kreon's first astronomer and the regime's chief spin doctor), Glauke, and Leukon (the second astronomer of the realm and a man who keeps aloof from the intrigues of the court) – the story of Medea is told in eleven chapters. The narratives of the 'voices' transmit the details of the story in a roughly chronological order. The novel starts in Corinth at a time when tension is already high, but in the course of the description of events the past in Colchis is also depicted.

Wolf's Medea is not guilty of any of the murders ascribed to her by Euripides and those who followed his version. Instead, she is presented as an exceptional woman, a wise woman and a healer who has the welfare of ordinary people at heart. She does not hesitate to expose herself to infection by the plague, which breaks out in Corinth, but tries to help the sick. However, Medea is in danger, not only because Creon needs to have her removed so that Jason may marry Glauke, but because she has discovered that the state of Corinth is rotten to the core and that Creon's power was entrenched by the sacrifice of his own daughter. This forms a counterpoint to Colchis where king Aeetes has sacrificed Apsyrtus to consolidate his hold on power. Ironically, Medea's escape from Colchis and her father's brutal regime have brought her to a state which on the surface seems

⁵¹ Crossland 1992:63.

⁵² Wolf 1997.

⁵³ Wolf 1997:9.

prosperous and benign, but on closer inspection is totally corrupt. The position of women in both these states is that of subordinates. Additional themes are xenophobia, imperialism and the clash of cultures. In Corinthian society, not only the Colchians who came as refugees with Medea are marginalized because of their brown skins, dark hair and different customs, but also the original inhabitants. These groups are huddled on the fringes of the city and excluded from participation in civic events.

Both themes are linked to the overarching one of the manipulation of power and the effect power has on those who hold it. In both states, power is used to exclude women. Early Colchis is depicted as a kind of socialist state, ruled by men and women alternately in seven year cycles. Aeetes was approaching the end of his second ruling cycle when the Colchian women were planning to install Medea's sister as ruler, but Aeetes engineered a scheme that implicated women in the slaughter of Apsyrtus and thus discredited them as potential rulers.

In Corinth, Medea discovers evidence that, faced by a similar plan to replace the corrupt Creon by his daughter Iphinoe, the king and his faction succeeded in eliminating her. Medea cannot be charged with discovering this secret because, according to the ruling party myth, it does not exist. Iphinoe has eloped to marry abroad, the official story goes. In order to discredit Medea and neutralize the threat that her knowledge poses, Akamas, officially first astronomer, but in fact chief of propaganda, spreads the rumour that Medea murdered her own brother in Colchis. Further charges are concocted against her and there is even a trial before she is formally banished without her children. This is reminiscent of trumped up charges and show trials in totalitarian states. Before she leaves Corinth, Medea entrusts her twin boys to the temple of Hera where she thinks they will be protected, but years later she learns that the Corinthians stoned them. As final blow she is told that the Corinthians have spread the report that she killed her own sons.

In Wolf's novel, Medea is exonerated of every act of homicide attributed to her. Although Glauke initially dislikes Medea because she would like to be Jason's wife, she is so distraught at the Corinthians' treatment of Medea that she commits suicide by jumping into a well. Of course, the Corinthians spread the story that she jumped into the well because Medea's gift to her, a bridal dress, burnt her.

Wolf's Medea is thus a tragic figure in a different way to Euripides'

protagonist. She does not even attempt to exact any revenge, but becomes the victim of relentlessly corrupt political forces and consciously suffers the full implication of the heinous injustices served out to her. For this Medea there is no escape into a world of delusion like that of Seneca's heroine, who imagines that through killing her children she has restored her virginity, in other words, that she has cancelled her whole relationship with Jason.

Christa Wolf has managed to produce a totally new interpretation of the myth. Her Medea stands not only for the injustices suffered by women and groups who have been colonized or are regarded as racially inferior, but for all victims of one-party states where corrupt rulers fabricate rumours and stories to discredit their opponents, who are summarily tried and punished. Parallels in the modern world are not hard to find.

Most of the modern versions dispense with the flamboyant final scene in Euripides' tragedy, where Medea is ready to depart in a chariot drawn by dragons. Modern artists represent the aftermath of the horrifying act in a different, more realistic way. Their protagonist is left in the everyday world and must accept the consequences of the events. Neil Labute's monologue, *Medea Redux*,⁵⁴ starts with the Medea figure already in that position. At the start of this monologue, she is in an institution, probably a detention centre, making a statement for the record. Gradually it emerges that this woman was seduced by one of her teachers when she was thirteen years old and abandoned when she became pregnant with his child. This adds a fresh dimension to the exploitation of women and represents another frequent theme of the modern media - child abuse. The bleak simplicity of the narrative underlines the horror of the outcome. She brings up her son alone, but, after a few years, again establishes contact by letter with the father. At the first face-to-face meeting of father and son, on his fourteenth birthday, the mother understands, not only that the father loves his son, but also that he is happy 'because he had gotten away with it all.'⁵⁵ This is the trigger that releases her desire to punish her exploiter. She kills the son she loves by electrocuting him in the bath. The play ends with the woman admitting that

⁵⁴ Labute 2000.

⁵⁵ Labute 2000:88.

the only thing that keeps her going is the thought of how 'he' (the father/teacher/exploiter) must be suffering. The very underplayed and restrained tone of the monologue with its shocking revelations shows how deeply disturbed the woman is. This is a counterpoint to the strong emotions and passionate language of most Medea dramas and subscribes to the notion aired in some of the other feminist adaptations (Albee, Crossland, Harrison) that any woman may become a Medea.

A similar elegaic tone is adopted by Diane Wakoski in her poem *Medea the Sorceress*.⁵⁶ The narrator likens her decision to give up her baby in 'the Home for Unwed Mothers' to Medea's decision to kill her children. Her action is prompted by the callous lack of support by her boyfriend, J, who has no scruples about writing to her about his adventures with other girls. Her description of her mundane life in different parts of the United States after this event is in ironic counterpoint to the 'dragonlady power' of Medea. Her references to other women abandoned by men define her story as the sad pattern of the lives of many women in the modern world. Although the sensationalism of the literal killing of a child or children may be absent, the grief at the loss is lifelong.

Liz Lochhead,⁵⁷ on the other hand, preserves the traditional Euripidean ending in her adaptation of the *Medea* created for Theatre Babel and produced in Glasgow and Edinburgh in 2000. This Medea subscribes to the feminist view of the world. She starts the 'Women of Corinth' speech in a way that unambiguously makes her a mouthpiece for women: 'ladies of all time ladies of this place and others ...'⁵⁸ Nevertheless, she is shown taking full responsibility for killing her children. As in the ancient dramas, her motive is revenge, which is only softened by her claim that if she delayed the deed,

'another's hand not a mother's loving hand
would kill my children'⁵⁹

To Jason she expresses the vengeance she has exacted in shocking terms:

'I have torn out your heart and devoured it.'⁶⁰ Thus, at the end, Medea and Jason are left, but the unbridgeable chasm between them and the two approaches to life they represent are indicated when Jason says, 'it's all over' and Medea replies 'it will never be over end of story.'⁶¹

Unlike the feminist interpretations of Albee, Crossland and, to a certain extent Wolf, who turn Medea into a soft, womanly character, Lochhead's Medea has all the fire and steel of the ancient Medeas. She does not spare Glauce whom Lochhead introduces in a speaking part in place of the Euripidean scene with Aigeus. The destruction of Glauce is given an added dimension because she is presented as a woman in her own right who, somewhat naively, does not want her happiness to hurt another woman. The Chorus have little sympathy for Glauce. Their feminism is robust and realistic. For instance, they are women 'of all times, all ages, classes and professions.'⁶² They call Medea 'sister', use strong language and call themselves 'all survivors of the sex war'. Their support for Medea falters only when she resolves to kill her children. However, even when they have accepted that Medea is not to be stopped, they express pity for her and put the situation in perspective:

We weep for you too Medea
mother of bairns
murderer of bairns
mother murderer
The adulterous husband in the other woman's bed.⁶³

The understanding of the Chorus expressed in this way is a powerful statement. It implies that Medea is not a monster. What has happened to her, may happen to any woman.

Lochhead's *Medea* does not exonerate the protagonist from any of the deeds ascribed to her and accepted as part of the myth since Euripides' *Medea* was first produced in 431 BC, namely the killing of her brother, the deaths of Creon and Jason's new bride and the murder of her own children. Nevertheless, this play makes as strong a declaration for women as some

⁵⁶ Wakoski 1991.

⁵⁷ Lochhead 2000.

⁵⁸ Lochhead 2000:9.

⁵⁹ Lochhead 2000:43.

⁶⁰ Lochhead 2000:45.

⁶¹ Lochhead 2000:46.

⁶² Lochhead 2000:7.

⁶³ Lochhead 2000:35.

of the others where Medea is portrayed as a victim of slander and the killing attributed to others. Euripides and Lochead both have Medea claiming the killing of Absyrtus as one of her services to Jason, but Albee, Crossland and Wolf make others responsible. Euripides and Lochead make the death of the princess the first part of Medea's vengeance, but Crossland and Wolf alter that. Crossland annexes the princess to the women's cause, while Wolf lets her take her own life in despair. Euripides and Lochead have Medea killing her own children to complete her punishment of Jason, although, by this act, she is cruelly punishing herself too. Crossland and Nathusius deny that the children were killed, while Albee, Wolf and Nick make the Corinthians the killers. Readers and audiences have to judge for themselves which of these Medeas – triumphant but anguished murderer, or wronged and slandered victim – makes the best figurehead for the feminist cause.

It cannot be gainsaid that all the versions of the Medea myth discussed here force a reappraisal of the original version by Euripides and of the position of women in society. It is worth noting that of these new versions, nine are by women: Gloria Albee, Marie Cardinal, Jackie Crossland, Liz Lochead, Marie-Sophie Nathusius, Dagmar Nick, Miranda Seymour, Diane Wakoski and Christa Wolf. This too indicates the important place Medea has taken in the minds of creative women and what a potent icon she has become for women.

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NOTES • KORT BYDRAES

NOTIZEN ZU PAMPHILUS

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J.B. Hall hat bekanntlich in einer Reihe von Aufsätzen in den *Studi Medievals* die sog. Bedier-Methode in der Textkritik scharf und witzig kritisiert.¹ Zwei seiner abschreckenden Beispiele von Texten, die nach dieser Methode herausgegeben sind, entstammen Toronto Medieval Latin Texts. Der Generalredaktor dieser Serie ist A.G. Rigg, und er schreibt im Vorwort dieser Editionen u.a.: 'Editions in this series are usually based on one MS only, with a minimum of textual apparatus; emendations are made only where the text fails to make sense, not in order to restore the author's original version. The effect is to produce a "scribal version" of the text.' Am Ende seines ersten Artikels (*Studi Medievals* 19, 465-66) gibt Hall in einem Exkurs auch eine kurze Kritik von K. Bates Ausgabe *Three Latin Comedies* (Nr. 6 der Toronto-Serie, 1976). Gewöhnlich schlägt Hall hier wie sonst den Nagel auf den Kopf, aber ich möchte doch eine der von Bates herausgegebenen Komödien etwas näher untersuchen, und zwar den Pamphilus, 12. Jh. S. 61ff.

In seiner Bibliographie S. 11 zitiert Bate u.a. die kritische Edition des Pamphilus durch F.G. Becker (*Beihfte zum Mittellateinischen Jahrbuch* Nr. 9, Ratingen 1972), aber weder er noch Hall hat diese vorzügliche Edition benutzt (Hall verweist nur auf die Ausgabe von E. Evesque in *La comédie latine en France au XIII^e siècle*, ed. G. Cohen, Bd. 2 [Paris 1931] S. 167ff.). Die Behandlung der Quellen und der Sprache des Pamphilus durch W. Blumenthal, *Mittellateinisches Jahrbuch* 11 (1976) 224ff, scheint Bate unbekannt geblieben zu sein; weder in der Bibliographie noch in den Anmerkungen wird diese gründliche Untersuchung zitiert; klassische und

¹ *Studi Medievals* 19 (1978) 443ff.; 24 (1983) 385ff. (Diskussion zwischen Rigg und Hall); 29 (1988) 423ff.

² Die Schwächen von Evesques Edition hat Becker beleuchtet (7ff.).