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THE ROBINSON JEFFERS MEDEA

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■ ***Editor's Note:*** The following article is taken, with permission, from *Laetaberis: The Journal of the California Classical Association.* New Series No. IX, 1992-93, pages 18-24.

Many teachers of classical language and literature are familiar with the 1982 production of Euripides's *Medea*, starring Zoe Caldwell as Medea and featuring Dame Judith Anderson as the Nurse. Distributed by Films for the Humanities, the production is a valuable resource for its dramatic power, also for the useful classroom discussions it can stimulate on the conventions of ancient and modern theater.

Its words are those of the California poet Robinson Jeffers (1887-1962), who began his study of Greek at the age of five, his instructor being his father, a Presbyterian minister and professor of Old Testament literature. Jeffers "freely adapted" Euripides's play at the request of Judith Anderson herself. Long an admirer of Anderson, Jeffers had been thrilled when she came to Carmel in 1941 to play Clytaemnestra in a stage production of his poem *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*. Eager to play Medea, but in a translation better suited to stage performance than Gilbert Murray's, Anderson wrote Jeffers to inquire of his interest. Jeffers agreed, and worked on the manuscript between 1944 and 1946.

The play was first produced and performed in New York City in October, 1947, with John Gielgud both directing and playing the part of Jason. Critical reaction to the drama centered on Anderson's "transcendent performance" as Medea. In a Broadway season that featured Helen Hayes in *Happy Birthday*, Ethel Merman in *Annie Get Your Gun*, Maurice Evans in *Man and Superman*, and the openings of *Brigadoon* and *Born Yesterday*, the Jeffers/Anderson/Gielgud *Medea*

stood out. In one reviewer's comment: "Even a New York audience, flinging self-consciousness away, shouts 'Bravo!'" The play ran for 214 continuous sold-out performances, then opened in San Francisco to a similarly enthusiastic reception.

Jeffers himself fared well in the early reviews, for his "free and modern" verse, "terse and direct, and what a boon to the theater after the contorted versifications of Gilbert Murray." John Mason Brown noted in *Saturday Review* that Jeffers's language had "at its best, an iron quality that Gilbert Murray's more liquid version cannot claim," while Joseph Wood Krutch wrote in *The Nation* that Jeffers's version, "for stage purposes at least, is vastly superior."[1]

Jeffers's "free adaptation" of *Medea* involved not a word-by-word translation but rather a creative grasping at the psychological meaning of each scene of the drama. To excellent dramatic effect, Jeffers shortened and simplified the speeches of the play, making for a brisker pace and sharper exchanges between the characters. Departing from the norms of classical tragedy, he discarded masks, divided the play into two acts, and truncated the chorus's role: Rather than performing choral odes as a group of 15, chanting the words and dancing to music, the three Corinthian women speak individually, in briefer, less philosophical statements, without chanting or dancing. Both choral song and rhetoric, then, play lesser roles in Jeffers than in Euripides. The story of Jason and Medea squared quite well with Jeffers's sensibilities, accounting in some measure, perhaps, for overall brilliance of his wording. Betrayal of an aging spouse, the arrogance of assumed cultural superiority, the thirst for revenge impelling insanely violent acts: These all had been part of Jeffers's thematic territory since the poems that had won him both critical acclaim and a wide, devoted readership in the 1920's.[2]

In Jeffers, Medea has almost none of the traditional Greek heroism with which Euripides loads her character.[3] She is more crazed, less civilized, more a terrorist than a hero who dominates the stage and inspires fear and pity with the killing of her own children.

In the first scene with the Corinthian women, for example, Euripides shapes Medea's words into a masterpiece of persuasion, leading to the Chorus's assent not to interfere with any plans Medea might devise. She wins them over with her calm, philosophical tone and with an appeal to their common plight as oppressed women. Having heard her off-stage shrieks of rage only moments before, we are impressed by her self-possession and her will to win. In Jeffers's version, these

neighborly women need no such convincing; Medea's words serve no rhetorical purpose but reveal exactly how she is feeling then and there. In addition, Jeffers divides Medea's speech so that the memorable discussion of women's labor pain comes after her scene with King Creon, well after it could serve the persuasive purpose it had in the original.

With the focus on Medea throughout, Euripides has her dominate with her words and her wit the Chorus, two kings (Creon and Aegeus), and then Jason himself. The dramatist also provides as foils for Medea the Chorus, the Nurse and Tutor, all of whom profess moderation and all of whose "small" characters set off Medea's greatness of soul. Her stature is precisely that of Homer's Achilles, that of Sophocles's Ajax, paradigm male heroes. In explaining her gruesome plan, she sounds like no one more than Achilles: "For it is not bearable to be mocked by one's enemies ... Let no one think me a weak one, feeble-spirited, / a stay-at-home, but rather just the opposite, / One who can hurt my enemies and help my friends; / For the lives of such persons are most remembered" (Rex Warner translation). What emerges with the killing of the children is something like a satirical commentary on the heroic code: If this is what it takes to be "heroic," then the code itself needs serious rethinking.[4]

In Jeffers, Medea dominates the stage a great deal less, making the drama itself more of an ensemble piece. More than just her antagonist, Jason is a fuller and more sympathetic character. In Euripides's second Jason-Medea scene, she all too easily convinces him to let her children bring his bride the poisoned gifts. Here Jason is portrayed as no more than a gullible beef-wit, a man who should know better when Medea tells him that she had been silly in a typically female way. In his version of this scene, Jeffers gives Jason strong paternal feelings onstage. He is shown talking with the sons, lovingly, in a scene modeled directly on the tender meeting between the Trojan hero Hektor and his son Astyanax in Book VI of Homer's *Iliad*. If he errs in trusting his ex-wife to give a nice present to his new wife, he now more nearly falls in line with King Creon and King Aegeus in having sincere paternal feelings manipulated by a master in that art.

The ending of Jeffers's play allows for none of the divine intervention of Euripides's, no dragon-chariot sent by Helios to whisk Medea off to Athens. Instead Medea has two snake-lamps placed in the doorway. When Jason comes after her threatening to kill her, Medea scares him off with the fire-snakes: "They'll make you what Creon is,"

she says. Through this device, as in Euripides, Medea is able to escape at the end, after a third major scene with Jason, to "go forth under cold eyes of the weakness-despising stars—not me they scorn."

But strikingly missing from Jeffers's ending is the discordant note on divine justice struck by Euripides; for Helios is Medea's grandfather, and there is no hint of any other motive in his provision of the chariot besides family favoritism. The disorder within Medea's family, and within the state of Corinth, reflects a cosmic disorder. Medea's allegiances all along have been to the older, chthonic gods, not the Olympians, and these gods obviously have retained some powers. As in Homer's theology, Euripides's gods operate on different levels, different dimensions of reality, often in conflict with each other, and so humans suffer a deep insecurity: Who knows what gods might favor or oppress us, for reasons all their own? In placating one god, don't we, necessarily, offend others?

Jeffers shows little interest in Greek cosmology, is much more interested in the psychology of betrayal and revenge. Intimacy has bred contempt on both sides of the Jason-Medea connubial bed. The result, again familiar Jeffers territory, is a family situation out of line with nature and natural processes, culminating, of course, in a mother's murder of her young.[5]

Jeffers's images of nature misaligned are so many and so well ordered that what at first seems poetic embellishment ultimately emerges as theme. Medea acts against family and state, but more so against nature itself. She wins praise from Jeffers for standing above the ritualistic "golden mean" thinking of the Nurse and Chorus, but the direction of her rebellion is way, way off. Crazed by passion, still a stranger to the best of Greek civilization, Medea is tragic but not in the Aristotelian mode. Her child-slaughter and escape evoke not fear and pity, but revulsion and anger, despite our precise understanding of why she did what she did.

In the end, the one intellectual document that Jeffers's *Medea* brings most closely to mind is Bertrand Russell's ironically titled essay, "The Superior Virtue of the Oppressed."[6] Like Russell, Jeffers understands oppression and sympathizes with its victims, but refuses to romanticize the ugliness of retaliatory violence. At the very least, his words suggest, Medea should have kept the children out of it and used all her pharmacological skill on Jason himself, saving the indirect method for another time and place. ■

— NOTES —

[1] For reviews of *Medea*, see Joseph Wood Krutch in *The Nation* (8 November 1947, 509-510); John Mason Brown in *Saturday Review* (22 November 1947, 2427); *Commonweal* (7 November 1947, 94); *New Republic* (3 November 1947, 36); *New Yorker* (1 November 1947, 44); *Newsweek* (3 November 1947, 76); and *Time* (3 November 1947, 68).

[2] A good general introduction to the poetry of Robinson Jeffers is given in Frederic I. Carpenter, *Robinson Jeffers* (Twayne, 1962).

[3] On the heroism of Medea, see Elizabeth B. Bongie, "Heroic Elements in the *Medea* of Euripides," *TAPA* 107 (1977): 2756. For a very different view, see Denys Page, *Euripides' Medea* (Oxford University Press, 1938), especially xiv-xxi.

[4] On Euripides's place as a tragedian critical of tradition, both literary and more broadly cultural, see Ann Norris Michelini, *Euripides and the Tragic Tradition* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1987), especially Chapters Two and Three.

[5] Readers interested in Jeffers's harsh treatment of "family values" should read his long poems "Tamar," "Roan Stallion," "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," "Cawdor," and "The Double Axe."

[6] The essay can be found in his *Unpopular Essays* (Simon and Schuster, 1950).

ART & ULTIMATE QUESTIONS:
EDITOR'S PRE-NOTE

■ Robinson Jeffers in his mythopoesis seems always to be seeking images to embrace the whole of experience. The cosmos in its brilliance, immensity, and mysterious sacrificial rhythms was especially a center of focus. In Cawdor's eagle's death dream, in California's cosmic stallion, in the Hanged God of "At the Birth of an Age," he projected archetypes of life, expressions of the sacrificial nature of creation. But basic to the poet Jeffers was Jeffers the scientist. Poetic truth must not evade scientific realities; Jeffers needed to meet the cosmic mystery frontally. Over his lifetime he seems to have been in vital pursuit of revelation from the science of physics and astronomy, models which would give authenticity to his imagery. From his brother Hamilton, and from the *Scientific American*, which we are told he for some time subscribed to, he was able to follow the breathtaking epiphanies of the stellar expanses. In the late twenties he was able to discover with Edwin Powell Hubble, who was later to become an acquaintance if not a close friend, the startling truth of galaxies, each with its swirling millions of stars. And then, from the red-shift in their spectra, came an insight as to the speeds with which these galaxies flee each other.

Early on but after Galileo and Copernicus, the model for the universe was a vast stellar expanse, not Earth-centered. Then came galaxies, swirling clusters of star-systems and nebulae. From Hubble's estimate of their speeds from a retro-projected center and from each other came the question: Would the universe as we know it recede, part from part, as it were forever or would the gravity-attraction of the whole's parts finally overcome centrifugal force and become a ruling centripetal pull bringing all back to their starting point, thence perhaps to be sent out again and return again; thus was born the model of the