

## After Euripides: Esotericism in Medea's English Literary Tradition

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*The Euripidean Medea remains a mystery to human understanding. The esotericism of her story has allowed for dramatically different representations. In tracing her English literary history, from classical to contemporary dramatists, this paper follows Medea's characters throughout the centuries. Drawing on Euripides, it provides a wide perspective on a long tradition, pointing out the distinctive intellectual and moral features of each historical period. In particular, it aims to show how this esoteric figure actually suits the writers' ideology, who recurrently use Medea as a symbol to serve their different political and moral purposes, proving the malleability and esotericism of myth.*

It has all gone sour now, affection turned to hatred.  
Jason has cast aside his children and my mistress,  
and now goes to bed in a royal marriage  
with the daughter of Creon who governs this land.  
And Medea, in despair, rejected by her husband,  
howls out "the oaths he swore" and calls upon the right hand. (ll.15-20)<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The idea of filicide escapes human understanding. Therefore, the claim that the retaliation carried out by the Euripidean Medea is her means to achieve justice, constitutes a highly esoteric, namely mysterious, statement. Tracing the history of how Euripides's *Medea* has been represented in the English literary tradition is a fascinating exercise to see how classical mythology can be understood and thus used, reused, misused, and even abused, depending on different ideological and discursive contexts. By departing from Euripides and his tragedy *Medea*, this article provides a wide perspective on a long tradition, pointing out the distinctive intellectual and moral features of each historical period, proving the long-lasting fascination with the myth and its versatility to address the specific social preoccupations throughout our ancient and modern history. In particular, it contributes to a better understanding of how Medea has been interpreted and rewritten in different historical periods: from the classical

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1. All references to Euripides's *Medea* have been taken from the 2006 translation by Cecelia A. E. Luschnig, *Euripides' Medea* (Diotima, 2006). <http://www.stoa.org/diotima/anthology/medea.trans.shtml>. [Accessed 11 May 2014]. Subsequent parenthetical references in the text will include line numbers only.

versions, which features a powerful, frightening and unpunished heroine, to the passive medieval figure and the evil early modern character, while noting the hesitant sympathy that Medea engenders in many eighteenth-century and Victorian approaches. Significantly, and beyond these modern renderings, many contemporary postmodern, feminist, and postcolonial rewritings of the myth represent Medea as a righteous woman, a symbol of female agency fighting against hegemonic powers.

In trying to shed light on the esoteric Medea's behaviour, one must reflect briefly on the rules operating in the mythical world, as conveyed in Euripides's classical tragedy. The last two lines of the epigraph that opens this article read: "And Medea, in despair, rejected by her husband, / howls out 'the oaths he swore' and calls upon the right hand" (19-20). According to the logics of divine justice found in classical mythology, Jason deserves his fate because he is an oath-breaker. As C.A.E Luschnig explains, "what happens to oath-breakers is that their family is wiped out. Medea will speed the gods' will by making Jason childless".<sup>2</sup> Euripides presents the infanticide as Jason's inescapable fate, as ordered by the gods. This is clearly indicated when Medea claims that she is determined not to falter in her decision or "give my children over to let a hand more hostile murder them" (1.238). The reasons for her murders, therefore, must be searched for in the divine world: as a semi-goddess Medea is always accompanied by the barbarian gory gods, like Taurus, Mars and the infanticidal Saturn, who exert the divine justice that rules that oath-breaker Jason must be punished and sentenced to live without descendance. Filicide is presented as the inevitable result of Jason's behaviour.

The Euripidean semi-goddess's actions are thus located in an esoteric realm, a world ruled by laws alien to the human world and beyond our mortal understanding. The murders must be seen in accord to this "out-of-this-world" logics, in the context of the Hellenic mythology where infanticide is commonplace. For example, evidence of this practice can be found in the Nymph's words in Robert Graves's *The Golden Fleece*: "Yet, when I bore my child, it was not a girl, to be preserved, but a boy; and in due course back he went, torn in pieces.[... ] No male child of our family is permitted to live beyond the second sowing season".<sup>3</sup> Also, filicide, as an offering to the gods, recurs in many western and oriental mythical and religious accounts, including the Bible, most notably in Abraham's offering of Isaac.<sup>4</sup> Thus, when Medea's actions are relocated in our rational human world, they become inexplicable, unless we consider Medea either a madwoman, whose emotions lead her to utter irrationality, or we scrutinise the significance of her actions in the esoteric context of the classical divine realm, in which she belongs.

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2. Cecelia A. E. Luschnig, *Euripides' Medea* (Diotima, 2006), 38.

3. Robert Graves, *The Golden Fleece* (London: Penguin, 2011), 6.

4. *The Bible*, Authorized King James Version (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998); Genesis 22: 1-19.

Originally, the myth of Medea developed from a figure common in several Mediterranean cultures: “the reproductive demon, who persecuted pregnant women and young children”.<sup>5</sup> These reproductive demons, whether found in ancient or modern times, are believed to be the souls of women who died as virgins or failing to give birth; as a result, and out of revenge, they kill children, pregnant women, or newly delivered mothers. This figure has also served as the popular explanation for rare illnesses related to childbirth such as “crib death, neonatal sepsis, puerperal fever and eclampsia.”<sup>6</sup> Although in some cultures there are also male reproductive demons, most of them are female because women’s role in society is obviously more closely linked to giving birth and nurturing children. There are many variants of the myth, but what seems to be commonplace to folk belief is that only childless women become demons. For example, Sara Iles Johnston focuses on Southwest American and Mexican folklore and in particular on the figure of La Llorona<sup>7</sup> (The Weeping Woman) who represents the ghost of a mother who, having murdered her children, spends eternity wandering around the world looking for other children to kill. These infanticidal women may have evolved out of an esoteric paradigm similar to Medea’s: women who in one way or another, do not successfully close their reproductive cycle.

### The Euripidean Medea

Whether Euripides was the creator of Medea’s infanticidal story is uncertain. Before Euripides’s play, there were others with the same title—as for instance Epicharmus’s and Deinolocus’s Sicilian comedies—, yet their remaining fragments are so scanty that it is very difficult to determine their actual episodes.<sup>8</sup> Regardless the originality of its contents, the authority of Euripides’s *Medea* is beyond question. In the decades following Euripides’s death, during the late fifth and the fourth centuries, his depiction of Medea’s filicide had a growing influence, and many comedies and tragedies similarly titled *Medea* continued to be written and performed.<sup>9</sup> As Fritz Graf argues, Euripides’s *Medea* is but a single link “in a chain of narrative transmission: on either side of the version that is authoritative

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5. Sara Iles Johnston, “Corinthian Medea and the Cult of Hera Akraia,” in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* (eds.), James J. Cluss and S. I. Johnston (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 45.

6. *Ibid*, 57.

7. *Ibid*, 44-70.

8. Donald J. Mastrorarde, *Euripides: Medea*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 64.

9. *Ibid*, 64

for us, there stands a long line of other versions,"<sup>10</sup> which offer not only a communal biography of the mythical figure but might also account for a different development of the same episode. The Corinthian story, which is the basis of Euripides's plot, is preceded by the Colchian and Iolcan stories, and followed by the Athenian and Median stories. According to Graf, these five individual episodes, each of which is tied closely to a specific setting, construct a "horizontal tradition" of Medea.<sup>11</sup> These different events were written and rewritten by many ancient authors: Euripides and Pindar in the fifth century BC, Apollonius of Rhodes in the third century BC, and Ovid and Seneca in the first century of the common era, to mention a few.<sup>12</sup>

In Euripides's rendering there is a feature that is crucial to the development of the story. As Edith Hall suggests, Euripides probably chose to transform Medea from a Greek citizen into a barbarian Colchian to connect its particular antidemocratic barbarity to her appalling misdeeds:<sup>13</sup> "Euripides' Colchian Medea is the paradigmatic 'transgressive' woman and her overbearing nature cannot be fully understood without reference to her barbarian provenance,"<sup>14</sup> and her unfettered passions are strongly associated with her ethnicity. Yet, it will not be until the nineteenth century with Franz Grillparzer's *Medea*—included in his trilogy *The Golden Fleece* (1821)—and Ernest Legouvé's *Medea a Tragedy in Three Acts, in Verse* (1855) that the remakings of the mythical heroine rediscover the dramatic potential of her barbaric origins.<sup>15</sup> Since the modern western world perceives itself as heir of the Greco-Roman, it naturally re-appropriates the ancient narrative and thus presents the barbarian woman as a natural threat to modern western civilization.

Euripides was a popular dramatist for several reasons: his easy style, his complex plots, his ability to deal with personal themes apart from the body politics, his skill to discard or ridicule the roles played by Fortune or the gods and, most especially, his tendency to "giv[e] voice to marginalised groups,"<sup>16</sup> which was considered by some of his contemporaries as sheer heresy. Peter Burian explains that while in Euripides's times Athens was in the process of perfecting the institutions of democracy and the consolidation of the Aegean

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10. Fritz Graf, "Medea, the Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well-known Myth," in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* (ed.), J. Clauss and S. I. Johnston (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 21.

11. *Ibid.*, 22.

12. Johnston, "Introduction", in *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art* (ed.) J. Clauss and S. I. Johnston (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 3.

13. Edith Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1989, 35.

14. *Ibid.*, 203.

15. Duarte Mimoso-Ruiz, *Médée antique et moderne: aspects rituels et socio-politiques d'un mythe*, (Paris: Edition Ophrys, 1982), 698

16. Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 2002, 6.

empire, simultaneously there was an emergence of radical ideas taught by Sophists, philosophers, and teachers of rhetoric to whom Euripides was linked.<sup>17</sup> This involvement allowed him to portray characters who engaged themselves in controversial epistemological, political, and anthropological speculations, thus illustrating the latest trends in philosophy and theology.<sup>18</sup>

The first production of Euripides's *Medea* was in 431 BC, a convulsed time after the Peloponnesian War, which might help explain the tensions displayed in his work. As Hall elaborates, although the presence of a Hellenic self-consciousness can be traced as far back as the archaic period, it was the fifth century that saw the development of the barbarian stereotype as opposed to the civilised Greek,<sup>19</sup> and it is very likely that the Persian invasion was a major factor in the creation of such stereotype. As she notes, the key distinction in literature between Athenians and barbarians produced by the Greek in the fifth century was political: the Athenians saw themselves as democrats, whereas the barbarians were seen as tyrannical and supporting a strict hierarchical system, thus portraying "the polarity between democracy and despotism."<sup>20</sup> Moreover, Athens was viewed as the centre of democracy, and consequently, "since tragedy is an Athenian as well as a Greek mode of discourse, the tragic barbarian is perceived in anti-Athenian specifically, anti-democratic-terms, not just vaguely anti-Hellenic ones."<sup>21</sup> In the late fifth century, shortly after the first production of Euripides's *Medea*, "artists began to emphasise Medea's role as a foreigner within Greek society by portraying her in oriental clothing,"<sup>22</sup> thus becoming—even visually, as evident for example in old vases—the paradigmatic outsider.

Because Medea is a barbarian she does not endorse democratic egalitarian Athenian values and is presented as an irrational being, a mad woman. Yet, she also conforms, if only at the beginning of Euripides's play, to the gendered stereotype of the easily manipulated helper-maiden. When discussing women's status in ancient Athens, Donald Mastronarde notes that "the respectable women of citizen families were ideally imagined as confined indoors, silent, and subservient", although he acknowledges that "our evidence is largely deficient."<sup>23</sup> The Greeks held the view that females had little control over their lives and, as it happens with any social constructs, real women internalised these notions and saw themselves according to those stereotypes, which contributed to their manipulation.

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17. Peter Burian, "Euripides," in *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* (ed.), M. Gagarin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

18. Ibid.

19. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*, 1989, 54.

20. Ibid.

21. Richard G. A. Buxton, "Review of *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy* by Edith Hall," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 111 (1991): 217.

22. Johnston, "Introduction," 1997, 8.

23. Mastronarde, *Euripides: Medea*, 2002, 26.

Euripides's ground-breaking views dramatizing human anxieties and fears were innovative, daring and highly influential. The social and political upheavals of Athens in the later part of the fifth century explain, as Mastronarde argues, "the tensions and contradictions of classical Greek culture" which are especially reflected in Euripides's work.<sup>24</sup> One function of tragic performances in Athens was to provide cultural authorisation for its democracy which might explain the negative reception of Euripides's *Medea*. Considering that the tragedy was only awarded third prize in the typical theatrical competition of the Attic Festivals (organised for the tragedians of the highest rank), Mastronarde suggests that it might have "shocked or offended the Athenians"<sup>25</sup> that a barbarian woman challenged the civilised Greek world and escaped unpunished, with the help of gods. According to Nicolás Goc, Euripides's is the only known ancient tragedy that portrays the heroine sympathetically and, in her view, it might be "this combination of sympathy, power and repulsion that has seen Euripides's *Medea* endure down through the ages."<sup>26</sup> Despite the filicide's shock, the reader of Euripides's *Medea* experiences a strong attraction to the classical character. Her insights into human nature, particularly her speech about the predicaments of women, may have been written in 431 BC by a man, addressed to a masculine audience and intended to be performed by a male actor, but Medea's words might well have been spoken by a contemporary woman.

The contents of the myth before Euripides's episode can be summarised as follows. It begins when Medea—daughter of Aetes, King of Colchis—meets Jason in Colchis (now Caucasian Georgia) and falls madly in love with him. He had arrived with the Argonauts on an impossible mission, commanded by his uncle King Pelias, to obtain the golden fleece, a symbol of power. Medea, who is on good terms with the powerful guardians of the fleece, is conveniently infatuated and manipulated by Jason and helps him out in his quest. In the process, Medea betrays her father and kills her brother. Afterwards, she flees with Jason, leaving her family and homeland behind. Jason and Medea go to Iolcus, where the second episode of Medea's story takes place. There, she displays the arts of witchery and teaches Pelias's daughters the ritual of rejuvenation, thus provoking the death of their father, assisting again Jason, this time to take revenge on his uncle Pelias. Jason and Medea flee from Iolcus and arrive in Corinth. Euripides's account starts here. After the infanticide, mentioned below, Medea goes to Athens where King Aegeus had promised to shelter her and where she almost kills his son Theseus. She goes off again, this time to what is now Iran and settles in the highlands amongst the Arioi, who would thenceforth be called "Medes."<sup>27</sup>

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24. Ibid, 2.

25. Ibid, 6.

26. Nicolás E. Goc, "Medea in the Courtroom and on the Stage in Nineteenth-century London," *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies* 14, no. 1 (2009): 30.

27. Graf, "Medea, the Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well-known Myth," 1997, 22.

Euripides's *Medea* follows Greek dramatic conventions, according to which intervals of action usually fall into five divisions: a prologue, the entrance of the chorus (*parados*), passages of dialogue (*epeisodions*) followed by choral odes (*stasimons*), and sometimes an *exodos*, or chorus recessional.<sup>28</sup> Euripides's prologue is a masterpiece of concise exposition in which the background of the story is briefly summarised by the nurse. The play itself begins in *medias res*. The couple had arrived in Corinth after their many adventures to obtain the golden fleece, and Jason, after meeting Princess Glauce (also known as Creusa) in Corinth, has decided to abandon Medea and marry the Greek princess, daughter of Creon, the King of Corinth. Due to the frightening threats Medea makes after her *agon* with Jason, Creon banishes her. Although Jason appears to be concerned, he is basically a practical man, looking out for his own interests and self-aggrandizement. For this reason, Jason's betrayal is not merely love treachery: he is an oath-breaker, perverted by his ambition. Medea is full of anger and cannot abide this mistreatment. She stalls for time and plans her revenge, prearranging a future with Aegeus the king of Athens, killing Glauce with poisoned presents (while her father dies when trying to protect her from the flaming robes) and murdering her own children with a sword. After these crimes, she prophesies Jason's death and escapes in a *deus ex machina*, a dragon-drawn chariot, to be protected by Aegeus, who had sought her to provide him with children and with whom Medea had previously made such an agreement, firmly sealed under oaths to the gods.

As a semi-goddess, Medea is always accompanied by the barbarian gory gods that exert the divine justice. Medea does not take direct revenge on Jason, yet she prophesies his death: "but you, a coward, you will die a coward's death as you deserve,/ struck on your head by a remnant of the wreck of the Argo/ seeing a bitter end to your marriage to me" (1385-87). Euripides's play tackles common human concerns and overtly engages in a discussion of female identity in connection with the esoteric key question that lingers at the end of the play: whether justice (divine or not) can arise out of this appalling revenge.

### English Literary Tradition on Euripides's Medea

The magnitude of the classical ancient tragedy was so disturbing for the British audience that it would not be until the twentieth century that Euripides's *Medea* was performed on a British stage without alteration, thanks to the English translation rendered by Gilbert Murray in 1907.<sup>29</sup> When surveying the medieval and early modern English literary tradition associated with Medea, it is striking

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28. B. A. Bagby, *The Story of Medea in World Drama* (Boston: Boston University, 1947), 16.

29. Hall, "Medea and Mid-Victorian Marriage Legislation," in *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre, 1660-1914* (eds.), E. Hall and F. Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 391.

to notice how disparate and even contradictory stories were combined in the remaking of the quest for the golden fleece and the infanticidal episode. In tracing the complex interconnections of these works, Ruth Morse's work on the medieval Medea offers a portrait of the heroine as playing multiple roles marked by her gender: she is "not only a succession of characters recreated by poets, she became, by process of imitation, a kind of literary parthenogenesis."<sup>30</sup> While always emotionally gripping and essentially theatrical, Medea "can be witch-like and evil; passionate and sympathetic; the alien in our midst (the 'other'); the champion of the oppressed and betrayed."<sup>31</sup> The enterprise of tracking how these medieval and Renaissance works may be connected is more difficult in Medea's case, for there is no single original source that can be considered a canonical referent; rather, there are multiple source texts which often present variations and contradictions in terms of themes, characters and events. As Johnston puts it "even within a single episode, such as the story of the death of Medea's children, an author had to make choices,"<sup>32</sup> and thus whoever took up the story of the infanticidal Medea had to choose not only an ending but also the cause of the crime. In that regard, Johnston surmises that Euripides's version became canonical because he brilliantly linked motivation to "personality and showed how that personality developed—how Medea became Medea."<sup>33</sup>

Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Heroides* and *Tristia*, along with Seneca's *Medea* (all produced in the first century AD), draw on Euripides's play to form the three basic classical authorial sources to Medea's infanticidal episode for medieval and early modern writers in English. Although Ovid and Seneca tend to stress both Medea's criminal will and her witchery arts as well as her escape thanks to the gods' help, they also refigured the story by altering to a great extent the Euripidean account. For example, Ovid emphasises Medea's devotion to Jason and her command of magic and control over the natural world with his detailed description of her concocting poisons. Ovid's depiction is used by Seneca who, at the same time, makes his heroine angrier and more capable of brutality than Euripides's. While the plots of the Euripidean tragedy and of the Senecan adaptation are broadly similar, the latter is generally seen as "cruder, and less sympathetic" to the heroine.<sup>34</sup> Just as she was more and more alarmingly reimagined by subsequent classical authors, Medea also becomes more threatening in the Middle Ages; and, even more so in early modern English rewritings. One of the key differences between the medieval and early modern renditions is that the medieval writers saw Medea's story as historical fact, whereas the early

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30. Ruth Morse, *The Medieval Medea* (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 1996), 17.

31. Harry Love, *Introductions and Translations to the Plays of Sophocles and Euripides: Volume II. Volume 1* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 2.

32. Johnston, "Introduction," 1997, 11.

33. *Ibid*, 11.

34. Katherine Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558-1688* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 4.



modern writers frequently saw it as mere literature, thus enabling them to exaggerate the story and manipulate it for their own purposes.<sup>35</sup>

Seneca and Ovid's accounts were the most translated and revisited source texts in the Middle Ages and the early modern periods, while Euripides's *Medea* received little attention.<sup>36</sup> In medieval England, Medea appeared in English poems or prose tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, John Lydgate and William Caxton, either in the form of allusions to the story or the character, as in the case of Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* (c. 1386), or in a full remaking of the story, as in the anonymous *Laud Troy Book* (c. 1400). Almost invariably, Medea was presented as a female demon and was used to discuss contemporary issues such as witchcraft and related religious matters. Misty Rae Urban argues that the appearances of Medea in Chaucer, Gower and Caxton's translation of the *History of Jason* (1477) "discover the ways these narratives use female monstrosity—in literal and figurative form—to dramatize the anxieties arising in a patriarchal society that defines the female as a slightly aberrant category of human" while depending on her "for maintenance and reproduction of the social order,"<sup>37</sup> that is, although women are perceived as inferior beings, they hold the reproductive power, an idea that becomes one of the crucial issues of any Medea.

In all of its medieval retellings the focus is on Jason's betrayal and Medea's subsequent reaction. In approaching the power of Medea, the most common strategies followed by medieval English authors were either to explain it as romantic impulse, placing the emphasis on unrequited love—as in Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (c. 1386)—or to explain her behaviour as female failure, carrying out a literary misogynistic attack that can be seen, for instance, in Lydgate's *Troy Book* (c. 1430). Chaucer and Gower's renderings of Medea followed the romanticised impulse by stressing her devotion to Jason; both are sympathetic to Medea, yet they differ in that Chaucer's heroine is a helpless figure deprived of agency,<sup>38</sup> while Gower emphasises the dangers she poses to patriarchal institutions like marriage and monarchy—although his final picture of her is a remorseful, victimised "complaining subject."<sup>39</sup> Lydgate's misogynistic picture draws on Guido delle Collone's *Historia Destructionis Troiae*, written in the early thirteenth century, which tends to portray Medea as sexually insatiable and to undermine her magical powers.<sup>40</sup> The general tendency of the medieval English authors is thus to limit Medea's power, either by the strategy of ignoring it altogether or by describing it in clearly limited ways. Urban also highlights that Medea's

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35. Heavey, "Translating Medea into the Sixteenth Century," in *Appositions: Studies in Renaissance/Early Modern Literature & Culture*, 2008, n. 1.

36. Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558-1688*, 2015, 51.

37. Misty Rae Urban, *Monstrous Women in Middle English Romance Ph.D.* (New York: Cornell University, 2008), 1.

38. Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558-1688*, 2015, 32.

39. *Ibid.*, 38.

40. *Ibid.*, 24.

monstrosity is emphasised in these Medieval works to present her as “highly ambivalent, intriguing and yet repellent.”<sup>41</sup> In the line of poststructuralist scholars, her thesis is that in these works the female monsters manage to create a new literary “thirdspace”<sup>42</sup>—using Homi Bhabha’s terminology—, in which patriarchal constructs of gender and otherness are critically exposed and challenged. As Urban contends, medieval authors used Medea because she was a paradigm of the revengeful wronged woman, but some also tended to stress her role as a victim and justified her crimes as the response to Jason’s abandonment, thus engaging in wholesale rehabilitation of Medea instead of replicating her destructive nature in the tradition of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.<sup>43</sup>

In the Renaissance period, Euripides’s *Medea* was not published until the 1540s in a Latin translation by George Buchanan produced in Scotland, and it was not until the twentieth century that it was translated again for performance by Wilamowitz-Moellendorff (1904) in Germany and Gilbert Murray (1907) in England.<sup>44</sup> By contrast, Ovid and Seneca’s accounts of the filicidal Medea were the object of several translations into English during the period 1566-72, appearing in more than one English version by 1688 with Ovid’s *Heroides*, the most frequently translated.<sup>45</sup> The first record of a classical Medea on a British stage was Seneca’s *Medea* in the 1560’s at Cambridge University.<sup>46</sup>

In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England the figure of Medea appeared frequently in a wide range of literary works: poems, plays, reference works and prose treatises, as well as in brief allusions, as for example, in William Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*, when Jessica invokes Medea’s rejuvenation of Aeson, king of Iolcus: “In such a night/ Medea gathered the enchanted herbs/ That did renew old Æson.”<sup>47</sup> Typically, sixteenth-century authors and translators had their readership in mind, and that period’s societal mores obliged them to reject the idea that Medea could escape without punishment and thus they tended to impose some kind of sanction on her. The early modern authors used the myth as a convenient admonitory tool to illustrate female wickedness and to deal with contemporary concerns such as witchcraft, the belief in the supernatural vs. the power of God, the security of government, as well as a warning of woman’s conduct.<sup>48</sup> In sum, they use Medea as a cautionary tale to suit their didactic and religious ends stressing the idea that “the supernatural inclines

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41. Urban, *Monstrous Women in Middle English Romance Ph.D.*, 2008, 155.

42. *Ibid*, 158.

43. *Ibid*, 155.

44. Love, *Introductions and Translations to the Plays of Sophocles and Euripides: Volume II. Volume 1*, 2009, 2.

45. Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558-1688*, 2015, 3.

46. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian: Greek Self-Definition through Tragedy*, 1989, 391.

47. Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, 2008, act 5, ll.13-15.

48. Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558-1688*, 2015, 5.

toward the *unnatural*, with all that that implies."<sup>49</sup> Such concerns remain apparent in the works of William Shakespeare, Thomas Norton, and Thomas Sackville, which present female characters, like Videna or Lady Macbeth, frequently evoking the figure of the classical Medea.<sup>50</sup> Although in this period authors and translators were inclined to diminish Medea's magical powers and strength and to punish her actions, their literary strategy differed from medieval writers in that they bluntly embraced violence as one of the heroine's key features. In general, early modern authors highlighted the conflicts that the character of Medea engenders as an unwomanly woman, with no regard for patriarchal institutions, as a pagan and as a witch, a demonised figure that remains intensely alarming while challenging well-established dichotomies.

By the eighteenth century, according to Harry Love, Euripides was the most popular ancient model, somehow having been assimilated into the cult of sensibility. Medea's tragic misdeeds and pathetic situations made his the best theatrical version, and the passionate Medea "is transmogrified into an eighteenth-century heroine."<sup>51</sup> Like in Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1748), the mythical heroine struggles to maintain her virtue as wife and mother while abandoned by Jason. Medea was regularly depicted as going mad, and the Euripidean character was adapted in ways that drastically diminished her criminal responsibility.<sup>52</sup> The audience of the eighteenth century was predominantly middle class,<sup>53</sup> which required plays that suited their bourgeois views of marriage and femininity. Accordingly, the figure of the murderer mother was incompatible with eighteenth-century sentiment, which characterized her, as some contemporary critics put it: "as 'monsters of inhumanity', whose 'barbarous crime' was 'of the blackest dye'", or referred to the filicide "as one of the most 'unpitifully horrible things in drama', committed by 'such monsters that degrade the whole human system.'"<sup>54</sup>

Richard Glover's adaptation (1767) was one of the most popular eighteenth-century English versions, with its focus on a deeply infatuated Medea on the verge of madness provoked by unrequited love.<sup>55</sup> This *Medea* offers a sentimental version of the old story adapted to the tastes of the audience. According to Hall,

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49. Love, *Introductions and Translations to the Plays of Sophocles and Euripides: Volume II. Volume 1*, 2009, 4.

50. Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558-1688*, 2015, n. 16.

51. Love, *Introductions and Translations to the Plays of Sophocles and Euripides: Volume II. Volume 1*, 2009, 3.

52. *Ibid.*, 3.

53. Hall, "Greek Tragedy and the British Stage 1566-1997," in *Productions of Ancient Greek Drama in Europe* (Athens: In PlatonMavromoustakos Athens UP, 1999), 55.

54. Edith Hall, "Medea and British Legislation before the First World War," *Greece & Rome, Second Series* 46 (1999): 48.

55. Love, *Introductions and Translations to the Plays of Sophocles and Euripides: Volume II. Volume 1*, 2009, 4.

one of the keys of its success was “the terrifying sorcery scene of the type which they enjoyed in ballets and light entertainments.”<sup>56</sup> The play was first performed at the Drury Lane in 1767 with Mrs. Yates, a well-known actress in the leading role.<sup>57</sup> As Bagby argues, Glover’s version does not follow the key features of Euripides’s play since “the outward structure is similar, but the body of the play bears little resemblance.”<sup>58</sup> For Bagby, Glover’s *Medea* is more similar to a Shakespearean tragedy than to a Greek one; for instance, the tragic foreboding of Greek tragedy is not present, the complex psychological driven of Euripides’s characters is missing and the playwright emphasises action and surprise up to the point that the audience hoped for a happy ending.<sup>59</sup> The eighteenth-century neoclassical versions almost always removed the chorus and reduced the supernatural elements and, in order to suit the audience’s sensitivity, they stressed love, increased the pathos of the scenes and pursued moral endings by reducing the criminal acts of their heroines’ crimes, suggesting for example that Medea “never killed her children knowingly.”<sup>60</sup>

Whether produced in the fifth century BC or in Victorian times, there was an assumption that it was natural for wives to suffer and that it was natural for men to discard the old for the new. As Jennifer Jones puts it, what was unnatural for a Victorian woman was to strike back, since for them “only unnatural women would rise against a system that is so much stronger than she.”<sup>61</sup> In Euripides’s play *Medea* does what no Greek woman would dare to do. The women’s chorus sympathises with her abandonment but advises her not to fight back and to bear her burden with dignity. Medea breaches all possible rules: decorum, ethics and most particularly the patriarchal laws, which were especially relevant in the Victorian socio-political context.

By the second quarter of the nineteenth century, there had been significant political achievements in Britain. The 1832 Great Reform Act was a major turning point, since for the first-time suffrage was not an exclusive privilege of the aristocracy, but included some middle-class male landowners. As more men were enfranchised through the Reform Bills of 1832 and 1867, suffragists began to call for women to have the right to vote, which nevertheless would not arrive until 1918. New philosophical ideas like utilitarianism and Chartism were circulating, while older principles like those proposed by Thomas Malthus influenced the economy by dramatically cutting subsidies for the poor, as seen in the controversial 1834 Poor Laws Act, which strove to reduce the poverty rate by creating workhouses. One of the most controversial parts of the Act was the “Bastardy Clause”, which effectively made illegitimate children the sole

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56. Hall, “Medea and British Legislation before the First World War,” 1999, 49.

57. Bagby, *The Story of Medea in World Drama*, 1947, 70.

58. *Ibid*, 79.

59. *Ibid*, 80.

60. Hall, “Greek Tragedy and the British Stage 1566-1997,” 1999, 57.

61. Jennifer Jones, *Medea's Daughters* (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2003), xii.

responsibility of their mothers until they were 16 years old. If the mothers of such children were unable to support themselves and their offspring, they would have to enter the workhouse. Such a norm fuelled infanticide.

Partly because of this new context and the legislation and public debates surrounding family laws, Medea appears less as the monstrous infanticidal woman than as the wronged, abandoned wife left to her own devices. Nevertheless, she is not portrayed as a victim; on the contrary, she is experienced, cunning and resolute enough to break out of the traditional Victorian female mould, thus showing to Victorian audiences that such a reaction could become an alarming possibility in their society. Whilst in the eighteenth-century authors avoided presenting Medea as filicidal, Victorian authors engaged directly in the taboo subject of infanticidal women. In Victorian times babies' murdering had become a pressing and unavoidable concern that, according to the press and parliamentary debates, had reached epidemic proportions, as reflected in later works like George Elliot's *Adam Bede* (1859) or Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891).

Industrialisation and incipient prosperity, along with a legal system that was not yet adapted to the new reality of the cities, created a growing gap between classes; prostitution, children's exploitation, workhouses packed with poor people treated as criminals and infanticide and other murders permeate many history books and literary pieces. Since the Licensing Act of 1737 theatre was banned from explicit political criticism, therefore plays often had to discuss social reform indirectly and Medea was used to do so. Greek tragedy thus became a useful vehicle to address and discuss social change and to articulate political criticism. The classics were much admired by Victorian society, deemed to be a source of elevated knowledge, and thus became an inexhaustible source of discussion.

In the early nineteenth-century, the controversial Medea had remained virtually absent from stage, except for Giovanni Simone Mayr's opera, *Medea in Corinto*, which opened in 1826 and was regularly revived until 1837. James Planché's *The Golden Fleece; or, Jason in Colchis and Medea in Corinth* (Haymarket, 1845) inaugurated a tradition of burlesques based on the myth of Medea concluding with Addison and Howell's *Jason and Medea: A Ramble after a Colchian* in 1878.<sup>62</sup> Planché's burlesque *The Golden Fleece* parodied the influential trilogy *The Golden Fleece* (1821) by Franz Grillparzer.<sup>63</sup> After Planché's parody, the theme of Medea was a recurrent object of burlesque, as seen in Robert Brough's burlesque, *Medea; or, The Best of Mothers with a Brute of a Husband* (1856) and Mark Lemon's *Medea; or, a Libel on the Lady of Colchis* at the Adelphi in July 1856, the last two parodying Legouvé's *Medea* tragedy produced in 1856 with enormous success.

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62. Hall, "Medea and Mid-Victorian Marriage Legislation," 2005, 395.

63. Franz Grillparzer, *The Golden Fleece* (trans.), A. Burkhard (1956) (Yarmouth Port MA: Register Press, 1821).

The figure of Medea challenged the theatrical establishment, and in its various adaptations received sympathetic responses from the audience, as was the case of John Heraud's tragedy *Medea in Corinth* (1857) performed at Sadlers Wells with Edith Heraud as Medea, and which was to become one of a series of mid-Victorian tragic Medeas in English. In the case of Legouvé's (1855) and its Brough's *Medeas* the impact was greatly enhanced by magnificent performers, namely Adelaide Ristori and Frederick Robson, who helped stimulate the audience's imagination, thus favouring debates on women's social status.

Times may have been changing, but not fully so for women. Many influential authors reinforced patriarchal views. It is little wonder that the notion of being a woman was still profoundly debased, given that men of the weight of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Ruskin, whose influence is beyond question, were repeatedly shaping men and women's mind-sets in this fashion. However, in Victorian times the traditional notion of the woman devoted to her husband and tightly bound to the domestic sphere was being timidly challenged, as women gradually entered the public realm. To counteract the Victorian paradigm of femininity, some women writers were eager to rehabilitate Medea as a proto-feminist icon. As Josephine McDonagh notes, in the late 1860s Medea started to become a theme for emergent women writers.<sup>64</sup> Likewise, Lorna Hardwick argues that "Medea became a catalyst for female writers' rejection of the domination of the male voice and for awareness of the conjunction of the oppressions of gender and race."<sup>65</sup> Medea, as the archetypal figure of female alienation and disenfranchisement, became a force for social progress, appearing as "a complex character through which to explore women's position in society, from which they seem fated always to be estranged."<sup>66</sup> T. D. Olverson notes that "the best-selling novels of Ellen Wood and Elizabeth Braddon, for instance, feature unconventional and assertive heroines, who bear an uncanny resemblance to Euripides' ancient antagonist."<sup>67</sup> In the case of Medea, the myth not only did offer the authority of classical drama to a contemporary cause, but also can be seen as the inspiration of the prolific genre of suffragette plays.<sup>68</sup>

The decade of 1880s characterised by the revival of British socialism, the birth of Unionism and the creation of empirical sociology, produced a generation of the

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64. Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder & British Culture 1720-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 164.

65. Lorna Hardwick, "Theatres of the Mind: Greek Tragedy in Women's Writing in England in the Nineteenth Century," 1999, n.p.

66. McDonagh, *Child Murder & British Culture 1720-1900*, 2003, 165.

67. T. D. Olverson, *Daughters of Dionysus: Women Writers and the Dark Side of Late-Victorian Hellenism Ph.D.* (Newcastle: Newcastle University, 2007), 51.

68. Fiona Macintosh, "The Shavian Euripides and the Euripidean Shaw: Greek Tragedy and the New Drama," in *The Oxford History of Classical Reception in English Literature* (eds.), D. Hopkins and C. Martindale (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 514.

new women who “imagined for a time, lived out the possibility of social and economic independence”<sup>69</sup> and dramatic depictions of Medea were not limited to the stage. Published within collections of verse both Augusta Webster’s dramatic monologue “Medea in Athens” (1870) and Amy Levy’s short play *Medea (a Fragment in Drama Form After Euripides)* (1884) fall within the category of “closet drama”, dramatic works that are written to be read or recited before private audiences.<sup>70</sup> Both Webster and Levy worked with Euripides’s myth to relate Medea’s character to the cultural changes they were experiencing during their lifetimes and used Medea to explore the ways in which rigid cultural expectations of a woman’s role in society, marriage and motherhood can potentially (and actually) destroy a woman’s sense of self. They both read the original myth of Medea as the dilemma of a powerful woman trapped in a society that did not accept powerful women. Though their commitment was seemingly the same, Webster portrays Medea as a character who becomes an active subject struggling against both masculine domination and her own self, while Levy’s Medea represents an Anglo-Jewish young woman victim of patriarchy and racism, struggling to be accepted by a bigoted society.<sup>71</sup>

In his essay “The Womanly Woman” (1891), George Bernard Shaw discusses the opposition between women’s domestic sphere and the public one, comparing the childbed with a battlefield. In his feminist view, motherhood does not entail being a good wife, confined at home: maternity does not mean that “child-bearing would endow the mother with domestic aptitudes and capacities as it endows her with milk.”<sup>72</sup> Shaw reinforces his idea by insisting that women can only emancipate themselves if they repudiate their womanliness, which includes, by definition, their duties to husbands, to children, to society and to law: “she has to repudiate duty altogether. In that repudiation lies her freedom.”<sup>73</sup> This was not a new issue. More than twenty-four centuries earlier, Euripides’s Greek tragedy also highlighted this tension, discussing the division between the domestic and public sphere and women’s right to develop fully. When Shaw compared the childbed with a battlefield, he was echoing Euripides’s similar thoughts in Medea’s speech:

They say that we live a life free of danger  
at home while they face battle with the spear.  
How wrong they are. I would rather stand three times

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69. D. E. Nord, “Neither Pairs nor Odd: Female Community in Late Nineteenth-Century London,” *Signs* 15, no. 4 (1990): 733.

70. Amy Levy, “Medea (A Fragment in Drama Form, After Euripides),” in *A Minor Poet and Other Verse* (London: Blackmask Online, 1884 (2002)), 12-24.

71. Augusta Webster, *Portraits* (London: London: Macmillan and Co., 1890 (1870)).

72. Bernard Shaw, “The Unwomanly Woman,” in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (New York: Brentano, 1891), 44-45.

73. *Ibid.*, 47.

in the line of battle than once bear a child. (247-250)

Murray's translation of Euripides's *Medea* (1907) became emblematic of the suffragettes revolutionary shift at the beginning of the twentieth century. Considered as a politically radical, feminist, pacifist, and anti-imperialist play, it was recited at their meetings. In *Euripides and his Age* Murray writes of Euripides: "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 today at suffragist meetings."<sup>74</sup>

In contemporary times, *Medea* is one of the Greek tragedies that has inspired more literary rewritings, operas, films, and visual representations. From feminist and postcolonial perspectives, the crimes may be seen as a vindication of the wronged barbarian woman, doubly colonised, who has succeeded in escaping Greek and masculine bonds. In this respect, *Medea* personifies the resolute and empowered subaltern. For instance, *Medea* fights extreme forms of patriarchal domination in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman* (2001), racism in Apartheid South Africa in Guy Butler's *Demea* (1990), and alcoholism and gender violence in Wesley Enoch's *Black Medea* (2007), which focuses on the situation of Australia's indigenous peoples. These contemporary *Medeas* are often reconfigured as victims to different hegemonic power structures who react fiercely to their subaltern positions, with infanticide frequently used to channel their rebellion against those abuses. It is in her ability to destabilise the system that we can think today of *Medea* as a symbol against oppressive structures of power. She becomes an apocalyptic destroyer capable of disrupting the hegemonic society which has oppressed her, while escaping unpunished.

## Conclusion

The above overview of some medieval, early modern, modern, and contemporary literary rewritings of Euripides's *Medea* reinforces the idea that classical figures and mythologies can enact and comprehend meaningful symbolic messages, constructing icons whose final significance may fluctuate in response to different interests. As explained by Claude Lévi-Strauss<sup>75</sup> they grow into "floating signifiers" whose ultimate meaning depends on the context or ideology where they develop. Myth contained, and still contains, the ordinary (and extraordinary) experiences and traditions of peoples, ultimately moulded by what can be called collective memories. This unsteady human source might be one of the main reasons for the myth's ideological malleability. As seen in

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74. Gilbert Murray, *Euripides and his Age* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1918), 32.

75. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss* (trans.), F. Baker (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1987), 62.



Medea's rewritings along the centuries, the paradoxical essence of myth facilitates its political ambivalence, it is used, reused, misused, and even abused to enact dramatically different values, depending on the changing socio-political contexts and, obviously, on the writers' personal perception of the world. Still, the powerful character of the Euripidean Medea remains a mystery to all of us.

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