Divine and Human in Euripides' *Medea*

At the climax of Euripides' *Medea*, the voices of the Colchian sorceress's two young boys, inside their house with their mother, are heard screaming for help from backstage. But then they fall silent. Jason arrives at his former residence in Corinth and demands that the doors be opened. Like Jason and the chorus, we have every reason to believe Medea is inside, with the slaughtered children. We actually saw her enter the house just a few minutes previously, stating unambiguously in her last speech that she was going to kill them, with a sword, without further delay. Our experience of Greek tragedy leads us to expect that the doors will open, and on the wheeled platform called the *ekkyklema*, or 'rolling-out-machine', a terrible tableau will come into view—Medea, covered in blood, bestriding the corpses of her little ones with a gore-streaked weapon in her hands. As Jason bangs at the doors, physically trying to force them open, our eyes are therefore concentrated on the level of the entrance represented by the staging. We expect the house to open and reveal the scene of carnage inside. Yet nothing happens on this level of view: instead, it is only on the upper periphery of our vision that the swinging stage crane at first comes to our attention, with Medea and the two little corpses visible within.

In Greek tragedy, ordinary mortals do not pass from the interior of houses to the sky without using doors and without our noticing it. Nor do they travel by the supernatural means represented by the machine for the gods. We now know that Medea, for all her plausible emotional anguish and ability to talk in an astonishingly frank and accessible way to ordinary Corinthian women, is superhuman. Aristotle, who explained tragedy entirely in terms of human ethics and psychology rather than theology, sensed that this '*ex machina*' scene was completely anomalous if Medea is understood to be an ordinary mortal woman; he therefore objected to the 'inorganic' and 'improbable' ending of the play (*Poetics,* chapter 15, 1454b):

> The denouements of plots ought to arise just from the imitation of character, and not from a contrivance, a *deus ex machina*, as in *Medea*. The contrivance should be used instead for things outside the play, either all that happened beforehand that a human being could not know, or all that happens later needs foretelling and reporting, for we attribute omniscience to the gods.

Aristotle is quite explicit that the sort of omniscience which Medea seems to possess at the end of the play, when she can predict the moment and manner of Jason's death, belongs not to humans but to gods.

After the final, vitriolic quarrel between Medea in the chariot and Jason on the earth, the murderous heroine nevertheless flies off, as the vindictive Aphrodite disappears from the stage in *Hippolytus* and Dionysus vanishes at the end of *Bacchae*. Her crime, like a god's action against a mortal, will remain unpunished, and she gloats over her possession of the precious corpses. The chorus are stunned: this is how they conclude their day outside that tragic household in Corinth (1415-19):

> Zeus on Olympus dispenses many things.
> Gods often contradict our fondest expectations.
> What we anticipate does not come to pass.
> What we don't expect some god finds a way to make happen.

They are trying to make sense of the horrifying events they have witnessed, from a religious point of view. They need to assumed that unseen, supernatural factors or agents, such as gods, have been at work—factors beyond the material, physical world. This is the realm of the unseen and the divine which the Greek called 'beyond the physical'--'metaphysical'. And this chorus are thoroughly metaphysically *confused*. They are not even sure exactly which god has brought about the events that have just taken place, and insist that they had no way of anticipating the tragedy at all. ‘Gods often contradict our fondest expectations’. The Corinthian women’s metaphysical incomprehension is important and not atypical of tragedy, a genre in which bafflement is a characteristic philosophical attitude of both staged sufferer and the watching spectator.[1] We, too, are fundamentally perplexed, even bewildered, by what happens to Medea and Jason’s sons. Can the gods really have intended the terrible deaths that have just occurred to take place? If so, why? Indeed, all the characters in the play, except for Medea, are left either dead or bemused.

Medea is one of the most adapted and performed of all ancient dramas. It has been turned into operas, dance theatre, novels and films as well as new plays. It has proved to be one of the most readily transferable of all the Greek dramas to different religious and cultural contexts. There have been Roman Catholic Medeas, Protestant Medeas, Jewish Medeas, Australian aboriginal Medeas, Japanese Buddhist/Shinto Medeas, Hindu Medeas, Confucian and Dialectical Materialist Medeas.[2] *Medea* is a tragedy that can speak to every community within the global village, and through performances and adaptations has already spoken to more of them, probably,than any other ancient Greek play, except Sophocles’ *Oedipus* and *Antigone*. There are several reasons why it has proved so endlessly enduring. They including its focus on conflict between the sexes, its staging of dialogues between individuals of different ethnicity, and its psychological exploration of the ambivalent feelings that children can arouse in a mother. It is also, importantly, an extraordinary exploration of the mind of a murderer, in the process of working herself up to kill another human, which raises timeless legal questions about premeditation, provocation, and diminished responsibility.[3] But a neglected reason why *Medea* is still so powerful is that asks more metaphysical questions than it answers, even though it its theology throughout is basically that of Olympian polytheism. The play leaves problematically *open* the question of the true religious or cosmic purpose of the events it has portrayed.

This inherent metaphysical openness has, in turn, allowed the play to be rewritten and performed in infinite different cultural and religious contexts without ever losing its basic intellectual power. Medea's children continue to scream for help as they die backstage, with the community powerless to help them. Jason's irresponsibility and selfishness continue to be repaid by the disproportionate punishment of multiple bereavements. A completely innocent teenage girl, Creon's daughter, continues to die in agony because she is marrying the man her father has approved. Medea herself, however mysterious she turns out to be, continues to lose her beloved children because her anger is too great to contain. Two entire families – Medea's and the Corinthian royal family – continue to be destroyed, by a terrifying female figure who claims to be implementing the will of the gods, and seems to be unaccountable. Human helplessness in the face of arbitrary and dreadful suffering never received a more compelling dramatisation.

An enquiry into the metaphysics of the tragedy and their instrumentality in its cultural stamina needs to look, first, at how the characters in the play themselves explain in religious terms what they are doing and suffering. The most prominent god in the play by far is the supreme ruler of gods and men, Olympian Zeus himself. Zeus supervised the implementation of the rules which constituted Greek popular ethics, and in this capacity was worshipped in a similar way all over the Greek world, by both men and women. His primary assistants in this awesome task were his one-time consort or daughter *Themis* (whose name means 'The Right [way of doing things]' or 'Natural Law'), and his daughter *Dikē* ('Justice'). The 'rules' which Zeus oversaw regulated human relationships at every level. They forbade incest, kin-killing, harming suppliants, hosts or guests, failure to bury the dead, and perjury. Sometimes they were called 'the unwritten laws' or the 'laws of all the Greeks.' Traditionally-minded Greeks believed that if they committed any of these crimes, then Zeus might blast them with a thunderbolt or exact retribution another way, often with the assistance of Themis or Dike. In *Medea* the theology of the play as understood by the nurse, the chorus, and Medea, is on one level, and at the opening of the play, remarkably simple: Jason has broken his marriage vows, the promises he swore to Medea, and has therefore made himself vulnerable as a perjurer to the 'Justice of Zeus'. There was even a special title for Zeus in his capacity as superintendent of oaths, and that was Zeus *Horkios*. The theology of the play is very traditional, and the key divinity is Zeus in his capacity as *Horkios*, along with his designated partner in oath-protection, Themis, and the elemental gods Earth and Sun, by whom oaths were conventionally sworn and who were named as witnesses to them.

The Nurse says that Medea is calling on 'Themis, who hears our prayers, and Zeus, who guards the promises men swear' (168-70). The chorus intuitively feel that a woman whose husband has broken his oaths will be protected by Zeus (158-9), and state that Medea calls on Themis (208-10),

> Daughter of Zeus, goddess of the oaths
> Which carried her across the ocean
> To Hellas, through the dark briny sea.

Indeed, when Medea gloats at the stricken father of her children from the safety of her chariot, she reaffirms that 'Father Zeus' knows what has really passed between them (1352-3), and asks what god would listen to 'a man who doesn't keep his promises, a man who deceives and lies to strangers?' (1391-2).[4]

The play, then, in one sense, is a simple parable of perjury punished. Yet its theology also involves cults that were specifically associated with Corinth and its surrounding areas. Jason owes his safety, he claims, solely to the patronage of the goddess Aphrodite (527).

Aphrodite and her son Eros are of course thematically relevant to the play, because Medea originally abandoned her homeland and took to crime in order to follow the man with whom she had fallen hopelessly in love. But it will have been just as relevant to Euripides' audience that Aphrodite was also the most important god at Corinth, and the chorus of Corinthian women sing an ode to her (627-41). The temple of Aphrodite at Corinth stood high on the rocky 'Acrocorinth', the hill which towered over the city. By the time of Pindar (that is, before Euripides), there were many maidens serving the goddess in the temple, and the city was famous for its prostitutes, who may have plied their trade in direct connection with Aphrodite's cult. Corinth, which had a steamy reputation, was the perfect setting for a tragedy about sexual jealousy.

Even more significantly, at the end of the play Medea says she is flying off to Athens via the cult centre of Hera Akraia, across the Corinthian gulf at Perachora (one of the wealthiest sanctuaries ever to have been excavated in Greece). She will bury the boys and thereby found a Corinthian ritual (1378-83), which will atone in perpetuity for their deaths. The Doric temple of Hera Akraia, which can still be visited, was ancient and spectacularly adorned with marble tiles; everyone in Euripides' audience will have known of it. Moreover, the large number of votive objects that have been found there by archaeologists (amulets worn by pregnant women, and figurines) show that it was visited by individuals anxious about the health of babies and young children.[5] The killing of Medea's children was therefore presented by the tragedy as the 'charter' or 'foundation' myth for a specific set of cult practices in the Corinthian area. Greek myth and religion often exhibits this 'dialectical' tendency, where opposites are united in the same figures: seers like Teiresias are blind, and children who have been destroyed are here somehow to protect other children from destruction.

All over the Greek world, Hera was the deity who represented women's social status as respected wives. Hera was worshipped as Hera *Nympheuomene* (Hera the Bride), Hera *Chera* (Hera the Widow), but also as Hera *Teleia*, Hera the Fulfilled or Fulfiller, the goddess who helped women finalise their marriages satisfactorily with the production of a healthy son. She is, in addition, the angry wife of Zeus, permanently disgruntled at his infidelities. In both capacities—Hera *Teleia* and Hera humiliated by her husband's straying--she is a figure who offers a parallel to Medea in a less specifically Corinthian way. But a discussion of the religion in this play is not complete without Medea's special relationships with two other gods, on the first of whom she calls when no men are in earshot (395-8):

> By Hecate, the goddess
> I worship more than all the others,
> The one I choose to help me in this work,
> Who lives with me deep inside my home,
> These people won't bring pain into my heart
> And laugh about it...

It was as a result of this passage that Hecate came to dominate ancient literature's scenes of female witchcraft. Greek lyric poets had already presented her as the dark daughter of Night, the bearer of flaming torches, with some special association with sexual desire implied by making her an attendant of Aphrodite. In art, she is often associated with the huntress Artemis, but in an underworld form, followed by the triple-headed hound of Hell—Cerberus—rather than the hunting dogs who attend Artemis in sunlit glades. But Medea's statement that Hecate is her favourite goddess fed the ancient literary imagination. By the time of the third book of Apollonius' epic on the Argonauts two centuries later, Medea is imagined to have been a full-time priestess serving in the temple of Hecate in Colchis in the Black Sea; Hecate has taught her how to use magical herbs which can put out fire, stop rivers in full flow, and change the movements of the stars and moon. But Euripides' portrayal of Medea in 431 BC was exploiting the *real* anxieties of Athenian men, who feared women with expertise in lotions, potions and incantations. This is shown by the evidence relating to the real-life fourth-century trial of a woman named Theoris, who was executed, along with her whole family, for the use of 'drugs and incantations'.[6] A speech by the sophist Antiphon survives from the fifth century, in which a young man accuses his stepmother of murdering his father with poison, and the speaker is clearly able to exploit a strong social stereotype associating female guile with pharmaceutical expertise.

After invoking Hecate, the goddess ‘deep inside her home’, Medea continues her crucial self-address like this (401-6):

So come, Medea,
call on all those things you know so well,
as you plan this and set it up. Let the work,
this deadly business, start. It's a test of wills.
You see what you have to put up with.
You must not let Jason's marriage make you
a laughing stock among Corinthians,
compatriots of Sisyphus, for you
trace your family from a noble father
and from Helios, the Sun. So get to work.

Medea’s other special relationship is with her grandfather Helios, who indeed lends her the chariot in which she can escape at the end of the play. The Sun is also invoked by Aegeus when he swears his oath to her, as it is by many other oath-takers in Greek tragedy, and this reflects standard practice; the regular divinities invoked in oaths, as we have noted, were Zeus, the Earth, and the Sun.

Helios is actually a rather difficult god to grasp, at least as early in antiquity as this, when in most places in Greece he does not seem to have been particularly important and it is not yet clear that he has been firmly identified with Apollo. It is from much later antiquity that his connection with Corinth is implied by the eleven slabs with mask-like heads of Helios which have been excavated in the Corinthian Odeum; these may actually have decorated the *scaenae frons*. Helios had a major cult in rather few Greek communities, the most important of course being on Rhodes, where a spectacular sacrifice took: a team of four horses and a chariot were made to crash into the sea. The myth of Phaethon—which Euripides himself staged in a famous tragedy--may be related to this ritual.[7] An Athenian audience in 431 BC will have been reminded of the Helios on the newly completed East Parthenon pediments (now in the British museum), riding with his team of horses from the waves. But Helios was not very significant in Athenian religion in Euripides' day, and the epigraphic evidence for Helios being honoured in cult there, even in a minor role, does not occur until the early fourth century (IG II,2 4962). Helios seems to have been associated with the growth of crops, and was connected with the festival of Thargelia, held in May, when the first cereals and fruits were ripe. Passages in Plato imply that those Athenians who paid the Sun/Helios special respect, in the fifth century at least, were regarded as rather avant-garde and odd, if not actually outlandish and barbarian. After all, in Aristophanes' *Peace* (421 BC) we are told that Helios and Selene (the Moon) are betraying Hellas to the barbarians (406ff.) and the reason the hero Trygaeus gives is that 'we sacrifice to the Olympians, but barbarians sacrifice to *them*'.

Medea therefore has rather offbeat divine associates in Hecate and Helios. She is not exactly a goddess, but neither is she susceptible to most of the constraints of mortality--she can physically escape what for a mortal woman would now be certain death at the hands of Jason and the Corinthians, and she can fly in a supernatural vehicle; what is more, there is no known ancient tradition, in any Greek or Roman author, that she ever died. 'Witch' is far too weak a term for her; she sees herself as the agent of Zeus' justice, and as some sort of demigod, she never reveals exactly what goes on when she is communing with Hecate and Helios. No wonder the chorus, and the audience, end the play so baffled.

The play, therefore, is paradoxically both traditional and extremely peculiar in its metaphysics. It offers a relatively simple explanation of the role of the major gods in the action: Jason is punished by Zeus Horkios, through Medea, for perjury; Corinth is the kind of place where sex becomes an issue, especially in the case of a man already patronised by Aphrodite; the events are a theological explanation for the origins of rituals at the cult of Hera Akraia. But Medea herself destabilises this simple explanation. At first one of Euripides' apparently most accessible heroines, who speaks in ways that can seem astonishingly direct and immediate even today, she turns out to have been completely unknowable all along. She has not been playing the game of life according to the ethical rules understood or decipherable by humans at all.

Perhaps the most important theological moment in the play occurs at the point where Medea makes up her mind to kill the children. After the scene with Aegeus, she calls out, triumphantly (764-6),

> Oh Zeus, and Justice, child of Zeus,
> and flaming Helios —now*, my friends,*
> we'll triumph over all my enemies.

Medea, astonishingly, counts amongst her ‘friends’ and allies not only Helios and Justice, but the top Olympian god, Zeus himself. The chorus hear this strange note that she strikes, and respond in what are the most telling lines, perhaps, in the whole play (811-13):

> Since you've shared your plans with me, I urge you not to do this.
> I want to help you, holding to the standards of *human* law.

The chorus are in fact articulating a view consonant with the contemporary agnostic political theorist and philosopher Protagoras, who insisted that humans had only their own powers of observation and reasoning to rely on in looking for explanations of events and phenomena. He famously said,

> About the gods, I am not able to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form; for the factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of human life.[8]

The chorus are insisting, quite rightly, that *human* law does not sanction the murder of children in punishment of oath-breaking husbands. Medea, on the other hand, instantiates the philosophical principle underlying the whole play – that human reason is *not* a sufficient resource for ensuring happiness, since life is uncontrollable, disaster unavoidable, the principles driving the universe are inscrutable, and suffering is indiscriminate and unfair. Most people who attend a production of *Medea* today do not think very hard about the role of the gods, if they think about them at all. But they still feel just as powerfully the philosophical bewilderment that Medea’s role arouses. This is surely an important explanation for the translatability of the tragedy into every cultural and religious tradition that has performed it in the global village.

In the European Renaissance, the Euripidean Greek *Medea* was rediscovered, and began to be read alongside the Senecan version, which was more accessible because it was in the more widely understood Latin language. Seneca had reacted to the metaphysical bafflement which Medea inspired, in all who watched her on stage or heard about her in epic poetry, by making her summon the help of what feels at the time like half the divinities in the pantheon. This is his Medea's opening imprecation (1-12):

> You, gods of wedlock and you,
> Juno Lucina of the wedding bed,
> And you, Minerva, who taught Tiphys
> To conquer seas in his new craft,
> And you, cruel ruler of the deep Ocean,
> and Titan, who shares out daylight to the world,
> and you, triple-bodied Hecate, whose shining countenance
> ratifies the silent rites of the mysteries,
> and whichever of the gods Jason swore his oaths to me by—
> gods to whom Medea may appeal more lawfully than he did—
> and Chaos of eternal Night, realms remote from the gods, Unhallowed Ghosts
> and Lord of the kingdom of despair, with your Queen, abducted by force…

Some of these gods are culturally 'translated' into their Roman avatars from the Euripidean Medea's own speeches—thus Hera becomes Juno Lucina, Helios becomes Titan, and Hecate remains Hecate. But Seneca's Medea adds and names other gods altogether. They include 'gods of wedlock' (presumably Hymen), Minerva because she helped make the Argo and supported its helmsman, Ocean, Night, the ghosts of the unburied, Pluto and Proserpina. Seneca’s Medea then explicitly summons to her side the ‘Furies who avenge crime, Furies with loose unkempt hair, writhing with snakes, and clutching the smoking torches in your gory hands’ (13-15). If they compared Euripides’ heroine with Seneca’s, and her liberally invoked divine assistance, new dramatists attempting a play about Medea must have felt even more confused. They will have been further perturbed by the newly philosophical tone of Seneca’s Jason. Seneca, being a Stoic, was not fully satisfied with such a god-centred explanation of Medea’s crime, either: something closer to his own philosophical position on her crimes may underlie the final lines of the play, in which Jason tells Medea to be gone to the furthest regions of the universe as understood in the Physics as well as the Metaphysics of the Stoic and Epicurean schools of philosophy: ‘Travel on, then, through the lofty spaces of high heaven and bear witness, where you ride, that there are no gods!’ (1026-7). If the Roman dramatist could so drastically amplify, supplement and rewrite the religious and philosophical dimension of Medea’s story, no wonder much later playwrights felt that they had every right to make it comprehensible to their own, very different, audiences.

By the 18th century, Euripides’ play, as well as Seneca’s, became increasingly familiar through translation into modern languages and adaptation for performance. Christianised neoclassical Medeas were the 18th-century norm in spoken theatre. The horror of the intentional child-killing needed to be ameliorated for an audience with strong ideals of femininity and equally strong Christian beliefs. One way of making Medea acceptable was to allow her exculpating fits of madness in which she committed her murders, as Agave in Bacchae is deranged when she kills her son Pentheus, or Heracles is psychotically deluded when he commits triple filicide in *Heracles Mainomenos*. In Richard Glover’s *Medea*, performed in London at Drury Lane in 1767, for example, a good deal of emphasis was given to Medea's temporary madness or 'phrenzy.' Another strategy was to bestow an altruistic motivation upon Medea, for example that the Corinthians would kill them by a much worse death if she did not kill them quickly herself. This was the expedient selected by Ernest Legouvé's for his popular *Médée*, much performed after its 1857 premiere in Paris.[9] In more recent times, adaptors and theatre directors have adopted several different strategies for dealing with the play's pagan religion. The first strategy has been wholesale *deletion* – many adaptations and stagings of *Medea* simply omit many of the references to the gods, certainly to the more obscure figures such as Themis and Dike. The specific references to Zeus and Hera often become rephrased as vague reference to 'god' or 'gods' or 'heaven', adaptable to almost any cultural context. More importantly, very few productions suggest in the final scene that Medea is perhaps not a human, after all.

Since the early twentieth century, the chief strategy used to make the religion in *Medea* comprehensible to theatre audiences has, however, been allegory. 'The gods' have been made to stand for something else, for another force of immense destructive potential which is not fully comprehended or controllable by humans, any more than the chorus of Euripides' *Medea* understand her or can control her actions when she claims that 'Zeus and Justice' are her allies. One of the first productions to allegorise the chariot scene was also the first in a translation (rather than adaptation) into the English language. This production, directed by Harley Granville Barker in London in 1907, was very important in cultural history because of its connection with the movement for women's equality in the United Kingdom.[10]

The translation was by the Oxford Greek scholar Gilbert Murray, who had had supported the women's suffrage movement since 1889. Murray and Barker may have been influenced by the success of Max Reinhardt's Berlin production of *Medea,* in a translation by the famous German classicist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, in 1904. But the political climate also made *Medea* a significant choice. In 1906 the movement for women's suffrage had been inaugurated, and the in 1907 the first mass arrests of suffragettes shocked the public: no fewer than sixty-five served sentences in Holloway Prison. Support for the movement grew rapidly, inspiring Barker to produce the first of the whole series of suffrage plays which flourished on the commercial stage, *Votes for Women*, by the Ibsen-influenced Elizabeth Robins. This impassioned piece staged a suffragette meeting in Trafalgar Square. October 1907 saw the staging at the Royal Court of Mrs W. J. Clifford's dramatic examination of the effects of divorce on women, *Hamilton's Second Marriage*. But it also witnessed the actress Edyth Olive, in the title role of Euripides' *Medea*, emerging from her house in Corinth and lecturing her audience on the injustices suffered by women at the hands of men.

Yet this 1907 suffragette Medea was no divinity. Reviewers remarked on how surprisingly 'human' Medea was, and complimented Olive on winning the audience's sympathy. In a seminal study of Euripides, published in 1913, Gilbert Murray writes about Euripides thus:

> 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.[11]

Murray's book has proved perhaps the most influential interpretation of Euripides of all time. But Murray’s translation, Harley Granville Barker’s production, and Edyth Olive’s acting combined to present the theatrical *machina* as a *metaphor*. It symbolized something very real--the scale of the consequences of a man hurting a very *human* woman. Although his translation was fairly conservative—even archaizing--in style and idiom, and kept almost all of the references to specific divinities, in the ‘Introduction’ Murray saw the ancient gods and Medea especially as designed to be read allegorically:

> The truth is that in this play Medea herself is the *dea ex machina*. The woman whom Jason and Creon intended simply to crush has been transformed by her injuries from an individual human being into a sort of living Curse. She is inspired with superhuman force. Her wrongs and her hate fill all the sky. And the judgment pronounced on Jason comes not from any disinterested or peace-making God, but from his own victim transfigured into a devil.

Medea is a hate-filled woman, transformed by her injuries into something almost superhuman – a human victim of male irresponsibility and cruelty transformed by injustice into a daemonic negative force of almost cosmic potency.

Gilbert Murray himself regarded Medea's child-killing as realistic: 'Euripides had apparently observed how common it is, when a woman's mind is deranged by suffering, that her madness takes the form of child-murder.'[12] The prominent suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst recalled how the great stirring of social conscience in 1906 had led to economically privileged women noticing the hardships of women in the lower classes. The focus was on a number of tragic cases of poor women 'which in other days might have passed unnoticed', but were now used to point the moral of women's inferior status:

> Daisy Lord, the young servant sentenced to death for infanticide; Margaret Murphy, the flower-seller, who, after incredible hardships, attempted to poison herself and her ailing youngest child. ... Julia Decies, committed to seven years' penal servitude for throwing vitriol at the man who had betrayed and deserted her; Sarah Savage, imprisoned on the charge of cruelty to her children for whom she had done all that her miserable poverty would permit. By reprieve petitions, by propaganda speeches and articles, the names and the stories of these

> unfortunates were torn from their obscurity, to be branded upon the history of the women's movement of their day.'[13]

The dismal crimes of these modern Medeas - infanticide, violence against their husbands, child abuse - were now seen as caused by their social status. Even intentional child-murder by women was now being seen as connected with male irresponsibility: like Daisy Lord and Margaret Murphy, Medea could now kill her children with premeditation and be given, at least in the progressive theatre, a sympathetic hearing.

Many productions of *Medea* have followed this seminal theatrical event by 'allegorising' Medea's wrath and superhuman power as the potential reaction of women suffering under a patriarchal social system. This was especially the case in the late 1970s and 1980s, when the Feminist and Women's Rights movements were at the top of the political and cultural agenda, at least in Western Europe and the USA. But in more recent productions, the divine element has often also been 'allegorised' in a psychological way, as representing Medea's disturbed psyche. This was certainly the case, for example, in Deborah Warner's production, starring Fiona Shaw, which was such a commercial hit in both London and New York in 2000-2001. There was no sign of any god from the machine; Medea clearly had a mental breakdown, and ended the play in a bizarre dialogue with Jason, washing the blood from her body. Similarly, the 2006 *Medea* at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, directed by Barbara Frey and starring Nina Hoss, was a psychological interpretation, although the damage to Medea's psyche was clearly caused in part by sexism. Medea spent most of the play confined inside a box-like house that represented both her dismal apartment and her inner mental world. Disturbing images and sounds were experienced by her and the audience, which seemed to represent the fluctuating pictures and sensations in her disturbed consciousness, while hands and other objects protruded inwards from the walls when her subconscious or conscious violent impulses were threatening to overwhelm her.

But there has been another way in which the divine element has been understood over the last half-century, and that is more to do with post-colonialism than with either feminism or psychoanalysis. Medea's revenge has very frequently been 'allegorised' as the violence of an oppressed people or ethnic group against their long-term imperial masters. This is an interesting development, because before World War II, Medea's religion was often represented precisely as a retrograde, primitive, barbaric belief-system, in contrast with what was presented as the more enlightened, Western, Christianised religion practised by Jason and his countrymen. This pattern can be seen, for example, in the Russian verse tragedy *Georgian Night* of the 1820s by A. Griboedov, where the Medea figure was a superstitious pagan Georgian serf-class mother, taking revenge on her owner with the aid of the *Ali*, malicious female spirits of Georgian paganism. Grobodoev almost wilfully ignored the actual official Christian status of Georgia in this presentation of the mother as an atavistic Asiatic barbarian.[14]

Henri-Rene's Lenormand's rewriting of *Medea* as *Asie* in 1931 similarly substituted a Christian religious framework by contrasting his Medea-figure's 'heathen' religion with the Christianity practised by her errant husband's culture. The Indo-Chinese Princess Katha Naham Moun's children have been educated in the Christian faith by French missionaries, and this has alienated them from her. De Mezzana [Jason] tells his significantly blonde European Creusa [Aimée] that his marriage was scarcely valid as it was performed to the sound of tom-toms in the presence of tribal demons.[15] Only a year later, Maxwell Anderson's *The Wingless Victory* (1932) staged a North American marrying a Malay wife Aparre. He comes from strict Puritan family and Creusa's name could not be more Christian – 'Faith'. But Aparre comes to realise that she must carry out the fate that her old religion *dictates* must befall the children of someone who elopes from her Malaysian culture with an alien, and that fate is death.[16]

In the era of European empires, such an interpretation of Medea's religion as inherently inferior but extremely frightening was frequent. But over the last few decades, the gods in whom Medea believes have often been used in anti-colonial and anti-racist productions to symbolise the original, precolonial identity and culture of people who have subsequently been subjugated, oppressed, deracinated and transplanted, and therefore as a potentially liberating force. Medea's escape in the machine can become, in such productions, a metaphor for the acquisition of political independence, but with a warning: alongside liberation comes the threat of terrible, violent reprisals against the colonising power. This was the way in which the religious element in the play was used, for example, in a South African production directed by Mark Fleishman and Jenny Reznek at the Arena Theatre, Cape Town, in 1994.[17] The different cultural and religious backgrounds of the people of South Africa were suggested by the use different languages including Xhosa and Zulu as well as English and Afrikaans. The production was 'a timely reminder to South Africans rejoicing in their new freedom that a meeting of different cultures must be managed in a transparently fair and equitable way if disaster is to be avoided';[18] Medea's superhuman quality therefore embodied the potential for catastrophic anarchy to break out in post-apartheid South Africa.

Ethnic and racial resistance are often more or less commensurate, as in racially divided South Africa, with class identity, and it is the threat of class warfare that is the final way in which I want to suggest that Medea's divinity has been allegorised in recent decades. In Latin America, for example, Medea's religion has been a symbol of the suppressed African origins and identity of a large proportion of the population, whose ancestors arrived as slaves in South America centuries ago. A play by Chico Buarque de Hollanda and Paolo Pontes (1985), entitled *Gota d'água*, relocated the story of Medea to Brazil, and involved the Afro-Brazilian spiritist religions that date from the arrival of African slaves to Brazil in the 16th century. They ultimately derive from Yoruba, the West African religion, but have syncretically assimilated Amerindian and Roman Catholic elements. The most significant one, and the one in which their Medea figure is an expert, is called Umbanda. Since the 1930s, Umbanda's adherents have been closely identified with the poor urban working class and underclass in Brazil. They worship a range of spirits (orixás) intermittently identified with Christian saints – Ogum, for example, is St. George.[19] The Umbanda religion uses much magical discourse and many spells. The play *Gota d'água* pits Creonte's atheist, sceptical, capitalistic rhetoric against her magical language, and she wins. He is scornful of her religion and it thus becomes a crucial factor. But the reason is not that the playwrights are believers – more that the magic becomes a metaphor for potential ethnic and class resistance.

The Brazilian version of *Medea* devised by de Hollanda and Pontes is one where Medea's ancient religion represents the anger and potential revenge of people oppressed not only by institutionalised racism that goes back centuries, but by their abject position in the economic and social systems. It is not the spirits of Umbanda who unleash their terrible violence, through the superhuman Medea, but the wrath of people humiliated and kept in poverty. The transmission of this kind of interpretation all over the planet, to Africa, India and Australia as well as Brazil, is partly a result of the influential film *Medea* of 1969, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini and starring Maria Callas. This film uses Medea's religion in a fascinating way, implying that the sacrifice of the children is an ancient practice endorsed according to her own culture in cases of desertion by a husband. Pasolini is certainly influenced here by anti-colonialism and its defence of the rights of all peoples to religious self-determination. But it is even more important that he himself saw the religion in *Medea* as a symbol of what was fundamentally a *political* issue: he saw no difference, he said, between the fundamental Marxist argument underlying his film *The Gospel according to St Matthew* (1964) and his *Medea*:

> In reality a director always makes the same film, at least for a long period of his life, just as a poet always writes the same poem. These are variations, even profound ones, on a single theme. And the theme, as always in my films, is a type of ideal and ever unresolved relationship between the poor and the common world, let's say the sub-proletariat, and the educated, middle-class, historical world. This time I have dealt directly and explicitly with this theme. Medea is the heroine of a sub-proletarian world, an archaic and religious world. Jason is instead the hero of a rational, lay, modern world. And their love represents the conflict between these two hemispheres. It's an old polemic of mine: the centre of the petit bourgeois civilisation is reason, while everything that is irrational, for example art, challenges bourgeois reason.[20]

Medea worships, and in some ways actually is herself representative of, the 'archaic' and 'religious' gods that are also the 'sub-proletariat'. Jason represents the 'reason' on which the bourgeois ruling class pride themselves and with which they have dominated the world. These two groups are in perpetual conflict. Here Medea becomes not only the force that can challenge the ruling class, but a metaphor herself for Art, the 'irrational' medium which can nevertheless challenge the bourgeoisie's hegemony.

What a long way we have come from the bafflement of the women in Euripides' play when they realise that Medea is somehow working the will of heaven! The blinding, elemental force of the Euripidean Medea, aloft in her fiery chariot, was for believers in Olympian religion a symbol of the terrible things that Fate can deal out to humans who have broken any of the fundamental taboos. In later eras, Medea's existential status as a quasi-god or demi-god has usually been replaced: her strength has sometimes been interpreted as the workings of a character suffering from psychosis, but equally often as a social or political force – the anger of oppressed women, ethnic groups and social underclasses. But when we approach Euripides’ play, it always needs to be remembered that it is the awesome, unknowable religious element, the metaphysical power embodied in the mysterious figure of Medea, which ultimately underlies all these interpretations.[21]

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[1] Richard Buxton, 'Bafflement in Greek Tragedy,' *Métis* 3 (1988) 41–51.

[2] For discussions of some of them, see Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Oliver Taplin (eds.) *Medea in Performance 1500-2000* (Oxford: 2000), Margerita Rubino, *Medea contemporanea* (Genova: 2000), Nike Bätzner, Matthias Dreyer, Erika Fischer-Lichte (eds) *Medeamorphosen* (Berlin: 2010), Anibal A. Biglieri, *Medea: en la literatura espan¤ola medieval* (La Plata: 2005), Adriana Lorenzi, *Non restate in silenzio: sulle tracce di Medea Colleoni, Virginia Woolf, Emily Dickinson, Dolores Prato, Azzurrina, Gianna Manzini* (Florence: 2008), Sabine Eichelmann, *Der Mythos Medea: sein Weg durch das kulturelle Gedächtnis zu uns* (Marburg: 2010), Lü Yixu, *Medea unter den Deutschen: Wandlungen einer literarischen Figur* (Freiburg: 2009), Elena Adriani, *Medea: fortuna e metamorfosi di un archetipo* (Padua: 2006), Liana Nissim and Alessandra Preda (eds.) *Magia, gelosia, vendetta: il mito di Medea nelle lettere francesi* (Milan 2006), Larissa Behrendt, *Contemporary indigenous plays* (Sydney: 2007). Unusual adaptations of *Medea* are discussed in several of the essays in both E. Hall, F. Macintosh and A. Wrigley (eds.) *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Oxford: 2004), and Edith Hall and Stephe Harrop (eds.) *Theorising Performance* (London: 2010).

[3] Edith Hall, 'Medea and the mind of the murderer', in Heike Bartel and Anne Simon (eds.) *Unbinding Medea: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Classical Myth*, (Oxford: 2010) 16-24. See also Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun* (Oxford: 2010), chapter 4.

[4] D. Kovacs, 'Zeus in Euripides' *Medea*', *American Journal of Philology* 114 (1993) 45-70.

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[5] J. D. Baumbach, *The Significance of Votive offerings in Selected Hera Sanctuaries* (Oxford, 2004); S. I. Johnston, 'Corinthian Medea and the cult of Hera Akraia', in J.J. Clauss and S.I. Johnston (eds.), *Medea* (Princeton, NJ, 1997) 44-70.

[6] See the speech *Against Aristogeiton*, attributed to Demosthenes (25.79-80), and D. Collins, 'Theoris of Lemnos and the Criminalization of Magic in Fourth-Century Athens', *Classical Quarterly* 51 (2001) 477-93.

[7] Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical* (Cambridge, MA 1987) 175.

[8] Protagoras Fragment 1 Diels-Kranz.

[9] See E. Hall, F. Macintosh, & O. Taplin (eds.) *Medea in Performance 1500-2000* (Oxford, 2000); E. Hall & F. Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy & the British Theatre* (Oxford, 2005) ch. 14.

[10] See E. Hall, 'Medea and British Legislation before the First World War, *Greece & Rome* 46 (1999) 42-77.

[11] G. Murray, *Euripides and his Age* (London: 1913) 32.

[12] *The Medea of Euripides* (London: 1906) 94.

[13] S. Pankhurst, *The Suffragette Movement* (London: 1931) 225-6.

[14] See S. Layton, 'Eros and Empire in Russian Literature about Georgia', *Slavic Review* 51 (1992) 195-213.

[15] See Fiona Macintosh, 'Medea between the wars: the politics of race and empire', in J. Dillon and S. Wilmer (eds.), *Rebel Women: Staging Greek Drama Today*, 65-77 (London: 2005).

[16] See A. Belli, 'Lenormand's *Asie* and Anderson's *The Wingless Victory*', *Comparative Literature* 19 (1967) 226-239.

[17] Well analysed by Yvonne Banning, 'Speaking silences: images of cultural difference and gender in Fleishman and Reznek's *Medea*,' in Marcia Blumberg, Dennis Walder

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(eds.), *South African Theatre As/And Intervention* (Amsterdam and Atlanta, GA: 1999) 42-8.

[18] See the review of this production by Betine Van Zyl Smit, available online at http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol1no5/vanzyl.html

[19] See D. DiPuccio, 'The Magic of Umbanda in *Gota d'água*', *Luso-Brazilian Review* 27 (1990) 1-10.

[20] http://www.filmfestival.gr/tributes/2003-2004/cinemythology/uk/film36.html - translation of passages from Pasolini's *Le regole di un'illusione* (Rome, 1991).

[21] A shorter and rather different version of part of this article, with less emphasis on the ancient religious and cultic elements, was first delivered as a lecture in Berlin at the Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz in 2009, and published in German as 'Medea als Mysterium im Global Village' in Nike Bätzner, Matthias Dreyer, and Erika Fischer-Lichte (eds) *Medeamorphosen* (Berlin: 2010). I am very grateful for helpful suggestions made at that time by Bernd Seidensticker and Erika Fischer-Lichte.