

20th Century Medeas

by Benedict Wilkinson

Euripides' Medea is a savage play: Medea – the witch, the foreigner, the scorned lover – kills her husband's new lover, his future father-in-law, and even her own children in order to exact revenge upon Jason. A number of scholars have seen the brutal murders as Medea's way of empowering herself, of converting herself from the victim to the victimiser. In this article, I intend to discuss some of the ways in which Euripides' Medea (through translation or rewriting) has been used to interrogate 20th century politics.

Perhaps the most famous translation of Euripides' Medea was that of Gilbert Murray, first performed on October 22nd 1907 at the Savoy Theatre in London. An brief look at the political situation of the early 20th century suggests why it was once so well-received: the early months of 1907 had seen the first meeting of the Women's Parliament at Caxton Hall, the proposal and defeat of the Private Member's Bill (allowing some women a vote) and the subsequent arrests of large numbers of suffragettes. Undoubtedly it was the combination of these events and Murray's own keen interest in women's rights which produced a translation so politically powerful that it became one of a small number of iconic texts adapted for recital at suffrage meetings.

Medea as a character certainly provided the Edwardian audience with a persuasive discussion of oppressed women in her speeches, but it was her actions which were criticised. Reviewers saw Medea's murder of her own children as the work of a madwoman or, more commonly, as implausible. Nevertheless, despite her harshly calculated infanticide – and the criticisms which came with it – Medea rapidly became a model of suffragist ideology.

A short passage from Sylvia Pankhurst's *The Suffragette Movement* tells us why Murray's version became so popular.

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... 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 propanganda 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. (quoted in Hall and Macintosh *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660-1914*)

As in Medea, the crimes of these women against their children were attributed to their financial and social status – a male responsibility. Nevertheless, the moral of the stories is clear: it is the failure of men which forced these women to act and by acting empower themselves, just as it was Jason's desertion which forces Medea to act and by acting empower herself.

Although Murray's Medea is culturally and temporally specific, other versions tell a similar story. Brendan Kennelly's Medea was first performed on 8th October 1988 in Dublin; the play was written whilst he was in a psychiatric hospital; during this stay he spent his time 'listening, listening to women... [who] had one thing in common. Rage. Rage mainly against men, Irishmen like myself'. Kennelly's Medea was more a rewriting of the myth than a translation of Euripides, and as such, the play is full of contemporary political allusions. Oppression of the female by the male is employed as a metaphor for the English political and religious invasion of Ireland (to which there are frequent references). And although Medea – as we know – retaliates against her husband by murdering her children, the question of English domination in Ireland is left eerily hanging.

Likewise in South Africa, Guy Butler's DEMEA interrogated the racial prejudices of the apartheid regime. In his version, Demea (Medea) is a Tembu princess married to Captain Jonas Barker (Jason), an English trader; the marriage gives Jonas a unique opportunity to trade with a number of villages unfrequented by white traders – an opportunity that he has used profitably for fifteen years. The play begins with Jonas preparing to lead a mixed race trekking party while another white trader, Kroon (Creon), prepares a separate all-white group. When Jonas defects to Kroon's group and marries his daughter, Demea sees this manoeuvre not only as the desertion of their marriage and children but as the advocacy of racial separation. In order to save her children from future racial oppression, she sends them to Kroon's camp – in the knowledge that the local warriors are about to attack it and that they will die.

Although DEMEA was written in the early 1960's, it required a mixed race cast and discussed sexual relations between those races (which were prohibited at that time) and this delayed its performance until 1990. DEMEA's anti-apartheid message is clear: Demea, like Medea, is the exploited foreigner, the 'other' who fights back against sexual, racial and political oppression. These three versions of Euripides' Medea all demonstrate the power of ancient tragedy to inform – and in some cases to change – modern political problems. In each case, Medea's victim status is imbued with characteristics relevant to the political contexts of the play – apartheid in 1960's South Africa, English interference in Ireland in the late 1980's. The reason that the suffragettes employed Medea as a role model – indeed, why Medea has been used as a role model by all sorts of oppressed groups – is that she is the archetypal 'victim turned victimiser', the powerless who empowers

herself. And as the Medea within the play fights back against her oppressors, so Medea, the play itself and all its variations, fights against oppression in its theatrical – and political - contexts.