

Medea at Pompeii

by Caroline Vout

There are at least six surviving paintings of Medea contemplating the killing of her children from the area around Vesuvius in Italy. One of the best preserved is Neronian in style and from the House of the Dioscuri in Pompeii. Today it is in the National Museum in Naples (inv. no. 8977), left.

Medea stands to the right of the composition, frozen forever, weighing her hatred for Jason against a mother's feelings for her children. They play close by, innocent of the fate that awaits them, yet also rather too 'posed' to be natural - on a block reminiscent of an altar. The sword hangs limply in her hand but her right arm is bared and bulging, indicative perhaps of her super-human power. That said, there is no sign of her sorcery here, no headdress to signal her foreign origins. In contrast, images of her flight after the killing 'pull out all of the stops' to emphasise her otherness, as barbarian cloak and Phrygian hat conspire with the serpent-drawn chariot to remove her from the horror of the murder-scene below.

An excellent, if controversial, example of these 'flight' scenes is the South Italian calyx krater (c. 400 BCE) which sold above its estimate of \$360,000 at the Hunt-Sotheby's sale of 1990. (See Susan Mazur's piece on this, which includes a picture.)

But for now, she is as human as it is, her upright, neatly draped body and pinned hair betraying little of the frenzy that will seize her. She could be any woman, unable to look at her children, unable to look the viewer in the eye.

The familiarity of the composition makes our recognition of her and what she is about to do inevitable. But still we wonder. The male figure in the doorway behind is most probably the children's tutor whose attempt at conciliation we perhaps remember from Euripides. His looking, fixed as it is, intently on the children, makes us more self-conscious about our own. What would it take to contemplate killing one's children? What would we do in Medea's position? Have we ever known and loved a 'Jason'? How far would we go to exact revenge? In this way we are implicated in the narrative, invited to become empathetic, sympathetic even. This is not simply an illustration of a famous moment from Greek mythology, but a powerful appeal to have us remake Medea, and what we can learn from Medea, in and for our own time.

Elsewhere in Pompeii, in the 'House of Jason' (sometimes called 'The House of Fatal Loves'), a similar scene - this time showing a seated Medea contemplating the murder of her children - shares the space of a small 'cubiculum' or bedroom with panels showing Phaedra struggling over her desire for her stepson and Paris seducing Helen. The combination has patron and artist

challenge Euripides for authorship, 'unmasking' Medea and making her illustrative not of a poem or play, but of real life, of male-female relationships in ancient Pompeii, and more trans-historically, the perils of passion. Who knows how far our modern readings coincide with those of the owner? But for all of us, these paintings add new and often challenging dimensions to our engagement with Euripides' drama.

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