

Women who Kill

by Helen Morales

Euripides' *Medea* is one of the most commonly performed Greek tragedies of recent years. What makes it so enduringly fascinating? Why does this play, among so many Greek tragedies, have a special appeal for audiences today?

Medea's crime – to slaughter her own children – is shocking. It was shocking to Euripides' original audience in 431 BC, all the more so because having the children murdered by their own mother was an unexpected twist to the tale introduced by Euripides. (In previous versions of the myth that no longer survive, the children were killed by others or were only inadvertently killed by their mother.) And it is shocking now.

Not all murders by family members are this shocking (though perhaps they should be). There has been comparatively little public outcry over the murder of young women by their male relatives in so-called 'honour-killings', increasingly frequent in Britain and other countries. And it is still the case that men who kill their wives often get away with murder (literally) in ways that women do not. Part of what makes *Medea* shocking is that she a woman who kills.

Women who kill are judged by our society to be especially deviant. As activist Beatrix Campbell puts it, 'The woman who kills is exactly what she is supposed not to be. Her act is deemed not only unnatural but impossible in a real woman; so she is 'unwomaned' by her violence and seen as the classic aberration, exiled from her community and her gender' [from the Foreword to Ann Jones *Women Who Kill* 1991).

Euripides too portrays *Medea* as 'unwomaned' by her violence. One of her motives for the murder is that, by getting revenge on Jason, she'll make sure that her enemies won't be in a position to laugh at her. This is a 'male' reason: heroes like Ajax (in Sophocles' *Ajax*) are very concerned to avoid dishonour. In portraying *Medea* as (in some ways) masculine, Euripides makes her resemble that other notorious female killer: Clytemnestra. In Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon*, in which Clytemnestra lures her unfaithful husband into the bath and then hacks him to death with an axe, Clytemnestra is described as a woman who 'thinks like a man'.

But *Medea* is not just a woman who kills: she's a mother who kills her own children. This makes her doubly compelling. We're hard on mothers in our society. Mothers who work, mothers who drink, single mothers: there's little some newspapers seem to enjoy more than 'mother blaming'. When popstar Britney Spears was photographed going to nightclubs (shock!) a few months after the birth

of her child, there was a media frenzy of condemnation. Her husband, also a party-animal, did not come in for similar criticism.

Medea is also a foreigner. Her foreignness no doubt pricked the prejudices of some of the Athenian audience ('our good wives would never behave like that barbarian witch'), but also emphasises her vulnerability. She is a woman betrayed and far from home.

Medea has such a contemporary feel to it because it exposes the sexism and double-standards that are still prevalent today. Medea's desire for revenge for her husband's adultery is immediately understandable to a modern audience. In her opening address to the chorus, Medea laments that women do not have the same freedom as men. She says, memorably, that she'd rather fight in battle three times than give birth once (something mothers might still identify with, even in these days of epidurals). This is why her speech was quoted at suffragette meetings. And it's why the actress Dame Sybil Thorndike remembered the great classicist and political activist Gilbert Murray saying that Medea 'might have been written for' the women's movement.

Medea also finds voice in Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved*. This tells the story of Sethe, a woman who chose to try to kill her own children rather than allow them to return to slavery (and succeeds with one of them). We might well think that Medea is more self-centred and has more resources than Sethe (mortal women don't have dragon chariots in the garage), but both Euripides and Morrison expose, with passion and tenderness, the plight of women who are subjugated, foreign, and desperate. Only when women are no longer so desperate, and the world no longer privileges men, will Euripides' Medea lose its fascination for modern audiences.

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