

Juliette Cherbuliez, *In The Wake Of Medea: Neoclassical Theater and the Arts of Destruction*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020. 256 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$32.00 (pb) ISBN: 9780823287819

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The complex and multifaceted mythological figure of Medea—foreigner, exiled princess, sorceress, brother- and child-killer—has fascinated, thrilled, and disturbed writers and audiences for centuries, producing some disparate, even conflicting interpretations. In 2007, Amy Wygant’s sprawlingly eclectic study *Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France* cast Medea’s appearances in early modern French theatre as heralding a new modernity, arguing that Pierre Corneille’s 1634 tragedy *Médée* allowed modernity to “bec[ome] itself in the mirror of the witch.”[1] While Wygant sees Medea’s various incarnations as mirroring the concerns of the cultures in which she appears, what concerns Juliette Cherbuliez’s *In The Wake of Medea* is, conversely, Medea’s alterity, the unsettling temporal and geographical otherness of a figure who remains untamable and irreconcilable to her contexts. More than just “a book about Medea” (p. 1), or indeed about (as the subtitle suggests) just “neoclassical theater”, this study offers instead a “nonlinear history” of Medea that stretches back from the seventeenth century to Euripides and Ovid, but also forward to Pasolini and (in Cherbuliez’s coda) Leïla Slimani’s 2016 novel *Chanson douce*. This history is accompanied and interwoven with a complex meditation on “Medean violence”, a broader phenomenon that Cherbuliez finds articulated in works—such as Jean de Rotrou’s *Hercule mourant* (1634) and Jean Racine’s *Athalie* (1691)—that have nothing directly to do with the princess from Colchis but in which her presence strangely resonates. Symbolically central to this study, of course, are Pierre Corneille’s two tragedies about Médée, *Médée* and his spectacular machine play *La Conquête de la Toison d’Or* (1660).

Cherbuliez isolates five primary features of what she calls “Medean violence”: it is “relational” (depending on and breaking down family bonds), “unassimilable”, “exceptional and therefore untimely,” and in consequence “nonredemptive” (pp. 19-20). Unlike the sanitized, redemptive violence implied by narratives of Aristotelian catharsis, Medean violence is for Cherbuliez purely destructive. Having recently worked on the traumatically unassimilable potential of another similarly “unassimilable” mythological case of kin-killing—Orestes’s murder of his mother Clytemnestra—I was particularly intrigued to revisit this murder in the light of “unassimilable” Medean violence. Aristotle himself cites Orestes’s action as a non-negotiable “given” from history that the dramatist has no right or power to change; indeed, as I have suggested, early-modern tragedians harness its very *invraisemblance* to turn the perpetrator’s own experience into a quasi-traumatic “unclaimed experience” (as Cathy Caruth would say).[2] Whereas the early modern Orestes becomes aware of his brutal matricide only in retrospect, however, Medea consciously claims her regicides and infanticides as her own, thus making her transgressions all the more inaccessible to rational analysis.

For Cherbuliez, Medean violence can operate entirely in Medea’s absence; for example, she explores *Hercule mourant*, a play which spectacularly dramatizes its hero’s suffering, as a

work “in which there is no Medea but there is Medean violence” (p. 119). “Exceptional” in its destructiveness, Medean violence nonetheless never offers a definitive closure: “in Medean tragedy the violence is not over [...]. The part of the story in which Medea lives to fly off is also the part that threatens or promises her return” (p. 21). Tellingly, on the following page Cherbuliez reformulates this idea as “The violence might always return” (p. 22), suggesting again a conflation between Medea and the violence that she exemplifies and which comes to exemplify her. Combined with Cherbuliez’s readings of Hercule’s agonized sufferings in *Rotrou*, this implicit conflation of Medea and her violence perhaps sheds some light on a curious lacuna in Corneille’s play. One of the most striking features of the play’s final bloodbath, in which the princess Créuse and her father Créon are ablaze with invisible magical flames as part of Médée’s vengeance, is that the agonized Créuse does not mention Médée in the slightest. Rather than accusing the woman whose magic and trickery have condemned her and her father to their agonized deaths, Créuse takes upon herself all the blame and responsibility for their fates, exclaiming “Je ne puis excuser mon indiscrete envie, / Qui donne le trépas à qui je dois la vie” (V. 4. 1381-82). If her father’s torments are her fault, she continues, this crime is surely expiated in turn by her own agonies. Against the general “unredemptive” direction of the play’s slaughter, Créuse thus curiously attempts to create a narrative of her own mistake or flaw (greed) and subsequent downfall (twofold death) that fits neatly into the standard Aristotelian schema of the tragic plot. While I had always read this as an awkward concession to Aristotelian norms on the young Corneille’s part, Cherbuliez’s study invites me to reconsider Corneille’s motives for having Créuse do this. By blaming herself for her own downfall, Créuse also rhetorically strips Médée of all agency and responsibility, by implication relegating—or perhaps promoting—Médée to the role of simple fact of life, or force of nature.

As Cherbuliez’s study often suggests, it is in a sense impossible to ever talk about Medea in isolation. Not unlike *Antigone*, whose critical and philosophical afterlife Cherbuliez illuminatingly sets as a countermodel, Medea is so thematically, aesthetically, and politically rich a character that in any of her incarnations she always seems to carry with her “all the freight of the figure’s literary and philosophical history” (p. 19). Given this burden, it can seem hard (even irreverent or prosaic) to see her as just one fictional character among others—as an individual with certain traits, powers, and experiences—and Cherbuliez does not seek to do so. At times, it seems that engagement with Medea invites new, more poetic modes of critique. There is something poetically creative in Cherbuliez’s engagement with her subject matter; by this I mean that alongside the rich and scholarly readings she provides of the different material, Cherbuliez knows how and when to let the power of images, metaphors, and associations dominate over dry technical precision. When she claims that the special stage effects of Corneille’s play “allow the dramatics of *La Conquête* quite literally to fly us into a future that is (contra Koselleck) truly premodern and yet truly unknowable” (p. 150), the words “literally” and “truly” are not truly meant literally, but rather have a performative force that taps into and builds on that of the stage spectacle. Cherbuliez’s evocative engagement with fire imagery provides another key example. Her opening pages offer a rich and compelling reading of fire (rather than blood) as the dominant symbol of the Medean tradition of violence, exploring its potency as a metaphor of both love and destruction, passion and death. Shortly later she lets the fire metaphor spread into her own metadiscourse, explaining that premodern tragedy is political because it addresses what she somewhat allusively calls “the fiery side of power” (p. 8). Yet it is not always clear how literal or metaphorical this fire is in Cherbuliez’s hands. Cherbuliez repeatedly claims that Medea causes Corinth itself to be destroyed in a mass conflagration (see, for example, p. 4, p. 54, p. 92). Certainly, Corneille’s Médée memorably fantasizes about Corinth burning at the

end of her astounding first monologue in act I, and Cherbuliez shows Corinth aflame in the frontispiece to an unauthorized 1664 edition. Curiously, of course, Corneille's script gives no direct indication that Médée actually carries out her fantasy of destroying Corinth by the end of the play; on a prosaic level, it just appears as an avenue that Médée considers but then abandons, but Cherbuliez turns this possible counterfactual into ostensible fact. The initial spark of this idea seems to come from Euripides's reference to the "stream of *all-consuming* fire" (my emphasis) shooting from Glauke's diadem, which Cherbuliez takes as evidence that Medea sets all of Corinth ablaze (p. 5). If this fire does indeed consume "all," then it is noteworthy that Euripides's characters never acknowledge it again; instead, it seems to be retroactively denied over the course of the play, just as the fire Cherbuliez initially insists upon as fact becomes, by chapter 3, merely a possibility: "*perhaps* all of Corinth is set afire" (p. 120; my emphasis). The action of *Médée* in Cherbuliez's reading is thus not constrained to Corneille's text but becomes teasingly inflected by possibilities arising from elsewhere (from Euripides, from Médée's own fantasy); Cherbuliez stokes up the embers of other counterfactual scenarios to let other readings and possibilities flare up. This is not the only example of this; elsewhere she tacitly fills minor lacunae in one version of the myth—such as the number of Pelias's daughters—with information from other versions, thus subtly reminding us that we can never fully disaggregate one version of the myth from another.

Just as she reflects the shifting stakes of Corinth's conflagration over time, Cherbuliez's methodology also raises some further interesting questions about time, history, and periodization. Her defiantly non-linear approach—and in particular her reading of Ovid in the light of Pasolini in Chapter 2—helps to destabilize the very possibility of finding a secure origin for Medea or her acts. Some justification of her resistance to such narratives is suggested in her discussion of the literary history of seventeenth-century French tragedy. Helpfully situating her core material for the benefit of the non-specialist, Cherbuliez rehearses several received notions about seventeenth-century French tragedy—for example, that it starts with Corneille's *Médée* and ends with either Racine's *Phèdre* or his *Athalie*, that it does not depict bloodshed for ethical reasons, and so forth—before reminding us that these familiar claims are (at least in part) a retrospective construct created by later generations' politicized attempts to cast neoclassical French theatre in terms of outmoded "rigidity and sterility" and monarchical absolutism (p. 9). Sensitive to the political forces at work in any retrospective constructions of literary history, Cherbuliez seeks not to "offer a corrective to the grand story of theater" but rather to "disrupt" it (p. 31). These disruptions are not always as radical as the backwards time-travelling of Chapter 2, however. When engaging with the received ideas and narratives about seventeenth-century theatre, for example, Cherbuliez takes a different tack. Whereas a more traditionally revisionist approach might content itself with nuancing, correcting, or clarifying received ideas, Cherbuliez sometimes uses them as a springboard from which to reflect further on broader issues about narrative and periodization. Her discussion of Racine's *Athalie*, for example, takes this play's emblematic status as the last neoclassical French tragedy as an impulse to explore the very idea of "lastness" within the play (p. 34).

This technique reflects what I find most distinctive about Cherbuliez's approach. Although there is plenty of compelling (and contextually informed) close reading across her study, as the *Athalie* example suggests, the material Cherbuliez discusses is not always the primary text *qua* text, but rather the primary text as part of a more general intertextual network. In effect, what interests Cherbuliez in Chapter 5 is thus less *Athalie* itself than "*Athalie*-as-last-French-tragedy", with the stakes of her analysis sending repercussions back and forth throughout literary history. Some might find this approach a little curious, since it works within

established narratives of French tragedy and thus reinstates their tenacity even as it questions their validity. Would *Athalie* be, or mean, something different if literary history had enshrined a later tragedian as neoclassicism's endpoint? Perhaps, in practice, it would. On another level, though, this process perhaps encapsulates and reflects Cherbuliez's awareness that although the narratives we use to make sense of things—whether Medea the figure, or literary history more generally—are tenacious and powerful, they are always provisional and open to creative critique. In this respect, Cherbuliez's study is not just an exploration of its subject matter but also a subtly intertextual, mythopoetic rewriting of the figure and myth of Medea herself.

## NOTES

[1] Amy Wygant, *Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France: Stages and Histories, 1553-1797* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), p. 2.

[2] Joseph Harris, "Tragic trauma? Remorse, repetition and the Orestes myth," in *Early Modern Trauma: Europe and the Atlantic World*, ed. by Erin Peters and Cynthia D. Richards (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2021), pp. 301-22.

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