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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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What does the aesthetic—art, literature, performance, music, garden art, architecture… any cultural production, really—offer that the historical cannot? What do imagined, intentionally contrived forms share with us that archives omit? In other words, what do they permit us to ask about the past other than "what happened?" I became a *dix-septièmiste* because so much of its scholarship treated not just the historical but also the aesthetic. This accounting of the material, embodied, sensory, and imagined past afforded the dimensions necessary for real philosophical inquiry into the experience of being human. Part of the impetus of this book was to mobilize a dimension of the seventeenth century that I felt was occluded by both current historiographical and literary-theoretical paradigms, in order to see what it might offer us.

An undergraduate seminar started it all: "Women Who Kill and the Men Who Love Them: French Tragedy." We explored why in the French seventeenth century, long understood as having evacuated the passions from the tragic stage to the point where its greatest plays seem nearly actionless and their characters highly cerebral, so much talk of violence concerned the acts of women and the feminized. Also particularly striking was the use of hypotyposis and other forms of vivid description to render unseen wounds visible, to bring off-stage mauling into focus, to remind us of the physical horrors of battles and war. I learned that violence permeated seventeenth-century tragedy, and I wondered why, and how, and whether that century might not tell us something about why violence seeps into much of our own culture, especially in art—the part we celebrate and make by choice. Meanwhile we tell ourselves and our children that violence is bad and that we really want peace. So a book addressing that most conservative and codified genres, tragedy, became a feminist project about politics, asking us to consider the violence of the past as the violence of the present.

Medea, icon of that enduring violence, exemplifies the kind of object of inquiry that demands a transdisciplinary (or even predisciplinary) approach. Of course, the treatment of any mythological figure exceeds the historical, but the historical vagaries of this figure's construction, and its multiple and overlapping valences and associations, make it especially demanding in this regard. The book I ended up publishing is my answer to that original demand. It turns out that it was an incomplete answer, and the extraordinary engagements with *In The Wake of Medea* by Zoé Schweitzer, Isabelle Ligier-Degauque, and Joseph Harris have inspired me to offer some current *pensées médéocentriques* (to borrow from Z. Schweitzer). Their responses in this forum, alongside ongoing conversations with other colleagues compelled me to codify some of my current thinking into six propositions about how we might rethink the relationship among historical studies, literature and performance, through a philosophy of politics.

1) *The quantitative is not the only way to justify or demonstrate importance, and sometimes it's not a good way at all.* What would it mean to assess the importance or significance of something while totally eschewing the quantitative? Literary historians tend to prove value by a sly numbers game: an object of inquiry matters because it recurs, which must be indexed to its cultural significance (the more appearances or iterations of a figure, the more it must mean to its culture), or it's a singular event whose aberration must be addressed.[1] In the seventeenth century, Medea is neither. Arguably in the medieval period and even into the Renaissance, this figure permeates so many arenas and discourses, while in seventeenth-century France there are really only a smattering of engagements. *In the Wake* does not treat all of them (If Longepierre's *Médée* is notably absent, so is Corneille's *Rodogune*, as is the "first" French tragedy, Péruse's *Médée* (1555) as well as such prose interpretations of the Jason and Medea myth as the 1650 burlesque version *Jason incognito*).[2] Medea is important for the ways this figure operates as an exception, a fleeting but recurring presence. It warrants examination because of how its presence tracks other presences, other phenomena. Most importantly, the Medean presence in literature speaks to a kind of endurance or recurrence which offers us something significant beyond sheer numbers. I think we should develop further a way of understanding such historical phenomena.

2) *Some of the early modern is neither early nor modern, and least of all early to modernity.* I have long been irked by the telos of the modern, perhaps out of a belief that we are not living in the best of all possible worlds, and so maybe worlds beyond ours—nonmodern worlds—might have some lost opportunities we should explore. I would like to recover the word "premodern" and emancipate it from its current association with "primitive" and related colonialist and imperialist connotations. We could be compelled to ask of premodern objects what else they do besides lead us to where we are. The character Medea is a kind of icon of a premodernity that leads nowhere. No avatar of progress, nor of the self-possessed individual, it is deeply rooted in a specific past. Medea then becomes (and this is where, as J. Harris notes, I part ways with the deeply imaginative and inspiring work of Amy Wygant) a figure of the endurance of the part of the past we never overcome, forget, improve on, or banish. It was in rethinking what Medea might afford us that led me to think of "Medean violence" and to insist, as Z. Schweitzer rightly points out, on the neologistic adjective that signals a violence without catharsis or end, a recurring violence. In the name of fully exploring what such violence means in the context of aesthetics, I do wish (paradoxically) that I had attended more to the specificity of the seventeenth century, perhaps by sharpening the connection, as I. Ligier-Degauque suggests, between the materiality and specificity of performance, its seventeenth-century embodied presence for audiences, and my own paradigm of theater as an enduring rehearsal of violence.

3) *Characters should not be yoked to personhood.* We also know that characters are not people and that they can be constructed through allegory, symbol, and other structures that push at their dimensionality and complexity. This is why one should beware of using literature (and all aesthetic production) as an index to "what was." Aesthetic production is more experimental philosophy than representation or record. Yet we tend to read traditional novels and plays for the integrity of the self that appears in characters, acknowledging such shifts and new pressures in these appearances as the emergence of psychological interiority or of the self-possessed individual. And we do so especially with theatrical characters (which in seventeenth-century French printed plays were usually labeled as *acteurs*—underscoring their agential qualities more than their mimetic ones). I

recall here Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's classic assertion that in the tragic universe, the human being and human actions should not be understood as "realities to be pinned down and defined in their essential qualities, but as problems that defy resolution, riddles with double meanings that are never fully decoded," alongside the many theater critics and theorists of modernist theater who forecast (with glee or lamentations), the demise of the character.[3] Here the modern returns to the ancient. While *In The Wake of Medea* endeavors to insert the premodern into these theories as something other than a stepping stone or archeological stratum, it does not address an important question that Z. Schweitzer so eloquently identifies, which warrants greater exploration especially in twentieth-century theater: the question of performance's relation to the archaic. I would love to explore that connection in regard either to Medea, through the works she and I. Liguier-Degauque mention, or to the role of violence as archaism (or not) more generally in performance (adding perhaps other creators: I think of Edward Bond, Tim Crouch, Lynn Nottage, Suzan-Lori Parks… the list could be quite long).

4) *Foreignness is an epistemological condition as much as a geopolitical one.* The character Medea's double status as foreigner and witch should not be conflated, because each signals an element of strangeness that refuses assimilation. The Medean presence is foreign wherever it appears. With this foreignness is imported and mobilized another way of ordering the world, a way Medea thoroughly owns. Inspired by J. Harris's comparison to Orestes's retrospective understanding of his crimes, I would venture that this Medean experience of the past might be "overclaimed": the character not only admits all her deeds, but also, carrying her children off-stage, she packs her whole past with her. Her knowledge is historical and also scientific, a science that is deemed unnatural to the Greeks because it is foreign and potent. So this estranged position is geopolitical and epistemological. This is what I have come to think of as "epistemological alterity": a condition where what and how one knows contravenes the laws of nature and the polis such as the locals have established them. With epistemological alterity there is no assimilation.

5) *Medea, and medean violence, is a political problem.* J. Harris's careful and totally accurate criticism what I will now call my "aspirational" reading of the burning of Corinth has compelled me to consider why I imposed that on Corneille's text, and why I will persist in relating this imposition to the assertion that Medea (and *Médée*) is a story more significantly about the already-bankrupt foundations of politics than about infanticide. Figuratively the demise of the polis is signaled in this text by the death of the sovereign and his daughter, and the anticipation of the heir apparent's own death (in the last tirade of the play Jason decides not to seek vengeance but to kill himself), deaths that remain in stark contrast to Médée's own flight and survival, and that are figured repeatedly by burning and flames. While representations of the burning of the polis are entirely exterior to Corneille's text (in the book I name the Amsterdam frontispiece, and Pasolini's filmic version), it seems to me that the fire-induced demise of the sovereign line underscores the politics of Médée's actions, and their ultimate effects. These politics stand in contrast to Créuse's petty greed, which indeed she regrets while dying, and Jason's final vacillations. Of course, the play can be played as a story about domestic conflict: this is precisely the power of the production directed by Deborah Warner and starring Fiona Shaw, which they have said is really a love story ending in divorce.[4] While this interpretation giving contemporary audiences an affective model for the drama, it also domesticates a conflict that is as much (or more) about the impossibility of Medea's living in the political structures that shape the world. It does seem truly curious, as I. Ligier-Degauque astutely indicates, that I conclude the book with an examination of the very

phenomenon *In The Wake of Medea* refuses to center, that of a mother who kills her children. By beginning with the deaths of the children, however, *Chanson douce* compels us to understand two important elements about interpersonal violence. First, it has histories which, however personal, are also deeply social and economic. Second, violence is powerful because it is refractive and prolific: it cannot be isolated in one place, person, or structure. In my reading, Leïla Slimani's depiction offers us a powerful lesson: by retaining the shock of infanticide, making it the apogee or denouement of a tragedy, we risk domesticating it, personalizing it, and blinding ourselves to the social and political structures which make it possible.

6) *We should keep thinking about the power of mythological structures to offer us insight into our political problems.* After fifteen years of researching and writing a book, I truly thought I would be as sick of it as I knew my friends and relations had become. This is not the case. Even this year, when I have been able to give talks on the book, I am particularly drawn to reconsider and elaborate the comparison made in the "Manifesto" between Medea and Antigone. Antigone has been the darling of political theory for a long time, but over the past five to six years, a particular version of her has been recurring in photojournalism with some frequency. The most famous image of this version is that taken by Jonathan Bachman of Ieshia Evans in July 2016, when Evans is facing Baton Rouge police during a protest after the shooting of Alton Sterling, but there so many more from all over the world.[5] This type of image features a fairly young solitary woman, very often identified as Black, Brown, or otherwise visibly minoritized, standing up to bigger, stronger and more numerous figures of armed authority: riot police, soldiers, armed security. This is what I call, *pace* Bonnie Honig who uses the same phrase to different ends, the Antigone effect: when a young woman is held up as a political savior.[6] When we call these pictures "iconic" and these women "figures of contemporary politics," we do not ask what happens after the image (Evans was arrested), nor do we ask why we celebrate the isolated stance of young women of color in the face of overwhelming force. In talks I have given recently, I explore the analogous "Medea effect," which is thoroughly unpolitical. In psychoanalysis it refers to a woman—of course—who "deprives a father of his kids;" in science it refers to genetic elements, studied in flour beetles, mice, and flies, which are self-destructive.[7] A bit more annoying than an insect, the mythological Medea inserts itself into our community whether we want it there or not. Always a foreigner, always carrying with and carried by its foreign knowledge, Medea indicates the extent to which our political order—liberal democracy based on self-possessed individual—is predicated on the exclusion not just of certain actors, but also of certain knowledges, and certain histories. It is perhaps finally for these reasons that I continue to think with Medea, and hope that you might, too.

NOTES

[1] I explore this further, with the example of Jean Racine's *Athalie* in the Registres de la Comédie-Française (RCF) in "The Sound of Theater: Crowds, Acoustics, Oration." In J.S. Ravel & S. Guyot, eds. *Databases, Revenues, & Repertory: The French Stage Online, 1680-1793* (2020). https://doi.org/10.21428/671d579e.7cdd7667

[2] Noguier, "Le Jason incognito." In Jean Leclerc, ed. *L'antiquité travestie. Anthologie de poésie burlesque: 1644-1658* (Paris: Éditions Hermann, 2014).

[3] Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (Zone Books, 1988), p.242. On the example of modernist theater, see Robert Abirached, *La Crise du personnage dans le théâtre modern* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994); Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater after Modernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996).

[4] Theater Talk Archive, Interview with *"Medea" Actress Fiona Shaw and Director Deborah Warner*, Interview from 2003, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zwDAFkSGSJI.

[5] The image and its context are considered in "Taking a Stand in Baton Rouge," in *Wikipedia*, April 20, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taking_a_Stand_in_Baton_Rouge

[6] Bonnie Honig, *Antigone Interrupted* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[7] Alain Depaulis, *Le complexe de Médée. Quand une mère prive le père de ses enfants.* Éditions De Boeck, 2008; Marcé D. Lorenzen et al., "The Maternal-Effect, Selfish Genetic Element Medea Is Associated with a Composite Tc1 Transposon," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105, no. 29 (July 22, 2008): 10085—89, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0800444105. See also Peter Ward, *The Medea Hypothesis*. Is Life on Earth Ultimately Self-Destructive? (Princeton University Press, 2009).

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