

Unbinding Medea

*Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Classical Myth from
Antiquity to the 21st Century*



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41. Marina Carr in Enrica Cerquoni, 'One Bog, Many Bogs: Theatrical Space, Visual Image and Meaning in Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*', in *The Theatre of Marina Carr*, pp. 172–99 (p. 178).
 42. Carr, 'By the Bog of Cats...', in *Plays One*, pp. 270, 324.
 43. *Ibid.*, p. 284.
 44. *Ibid.*, pp. 276, 289, 290, 288, 289.
 45. Marina Carr, *Portia Coughlan* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996); Marina Carr, *The Mai* (Loughcrew: Gallery Press, 1995).
 46. Carr, 'By the Bog of Cats...' in *Plays One*, pp. 339, 341.
 47. Susan F. Joseph, 'Medea in Late Twentieth Century Theatre: Ancient Sources and Recent Transformations' (unpublished dissertation, University of Washington, DC, 2002), pp. 170–72.
 48. Seneca, *Medea*, 910.

CHAPTER 15



Giving Birth to a New Woman: Italian Women Playwrights' Revisions of Medea

Daniela Cavallaro

'Thought up by man in his own image and un-likeness', woman cannot recognize herself in the female figures created by the 'dreams of omnipotence' of the male mind, claimed Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero. Thus, she concluded, women writers have but two choices: either they create new images of women or they 'steal' the old.¹ Like Cavarero, who recovered female figures from the world of ancient philosophy, many contemporary women writers appropriated from the literary canon the very stories which had condemned women to madness, suicide and murder, and rewrote them, from the point of view of the outsider, the marginalized, the monster: the woman.

This current in the rewriting of canonical literature has been called 'women's re-vision'. Adrienne Rich first defined it in 1971 as 'the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical dimension'.² Ten years later Alicia Ostriker affirmed that in revisionist mythmaking

the old stories are changed, changed utterly, by female knowledge of female experience, so that they can no longer stand as foundations of collective male fantasies. Instead [...] they are corrections; they are representations of what women find divine and demonic in themselves; they are retrieved images of what women have collectively and historically suffered [...].³

Both Rich and Ostriker used the word 'survival' in describing the purpose of women's revision. According to Rich, the act of re-vision was for women 'an act of survival'.⁴ Ostriker found that in some cases re-visions offered 'instructions for survival'.⁵ A woman's revision of a canonical text in fact would often provide an alternative to the fate that male authors assigned to women — survival instead of death. In some revisions this meant literally that the female protagonist would not die on stage but would go on living an independent life. In other cases the classical plot seen from a woman's point of view would expose — and maybe eliminate — the patriarchal 'frames' which kept women silenced.

Tragedy, in particular, is one literary genre against which many women writers reacted. In fact, it has been claimed that tragedy itself is 'derived from a male-dominated world',⁶ and that its structure 'reflects the structure of patriarchy'.⁷

Nancy Reinhardt suggested that Aristotle's *Poetics* implied that women are inferior and that 'it is not appropriate for a female character to be the tragic hero'.⁸ Thus, a female character in classical theatre had mostly marginal, supporting roles to the male hero. 'When she does take the center stage', Reinhardt continued, 'she is often exaggerated or distorted as very good or very bad. [...] Or, at the very least, if she moves into the conspicuous central male-space, she is depicted as abnormal or unusual in some way.'⁹ Thus, Reinhardt concluded, female roles in traditional Western theatre were reduced to 'inferior or passive support characters or as display objects for men's titillation or abhorrence'.¹⁰ Women playwrights, on the contrary, in their re-visions of tragedy, denounced the invisibility or the abnormality of the traditional female characters. Their female protagonists claimed the right not merely to act as support for the male hero but to take centre stage itself. Women's re-appropriation of classic tragedy, which first appeared in Italy at the same time as the explosion of the feminist movement in the 1970s, seemed therefore at the time to be an act charged with extremely subversive potential.

There is no doubt that Franca Rame's *Medea* (1977) and Maricla Boggio's *Medea* (1981), the first two plays considered in this essay, were meant to express an explicitly subversive message against patriarchal society and in support of the new ideas expressed by the feminist movement of the 1970s. It was, in fact, a period of intense struggle and remarkable success for the Italian women's movement, which during those years achieved several essential goals: the divorce law (established in 1970 and confirmed in 1974); protective legislation for working mothers; equal family rights; equal pay; and equal treatment of male and female workers.¹¹ The law legalizing abortion passed in 1978 and was confirmed by a popular referendum in 1981. Hundreds of thousands of signatures supporting a law against sexual violence were collected as well. Women's theatre during those years, from the all-women's 'La Maddalena', established in Rome in 1973, to other, smaller, women's experimental groups which performed their plays in streets, garages and political festivals, expressed these same social and political concerns. They discussed women's emancipation and liberation in the family, the work force and society in general; relationships among women; motherhood; abortion; and violence against women. The two revisions of the tragedy of *Medea* by Rame and Boggio reflect these issues of the early Italian feminist movement. Much different is the tone of the third *Medea* considered in this essay, written and directed in 2004 by Emma Dante. The violence, the passion and the subversive message of the early feminist years have given rise, in Dante's *Medea*, to a more mature, almost personal reflection on women's roles and women's past.¹²

Franca Rame's *Medea* (1977)

Rame's *Medea* stands out among the other plays for several reasons: its author — or co-author — is the only one who enjoys an international reputation;¹³ in fact, her *Medea* is the only one that has been translated into other languages and the only one available on commercial videotape. Working in partnership with her husband Dario Fo, by the early 1970s Rame had gained considerable fame thanks to supporting roles in her husband's controversial anti-government, anti-establishment plays. By

the mid-70s, however, Rame had reached a point of rupture. She decided she would no longer work as a member of the company if her only role was to feed lines to her husband so he could deliver the punch line. She asked for more satisfactory parts.¹⁴ This was the beginning of *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa* [*All Home, Bed and Church*], a 1977 performance based on a series of monologues with Rame as the sole actress.¹⁵ Her monologue on *Medea* came at the end of a performance which had seen Rame play the roles of several women, all of whom were suffering from some form of exploitation, either sexual, psychological or social. *Medea* was the only tragic section in the performance and so came to acquire a distinguished status, after the comic monologues.

One of the characteristics of both Rame and Fo's productions is their use of prologues in which the two actors directly address the audience, anticipating and explaining the topics presented in the theatrical pieces that follow. In the prologue to *Medea* Rame mentions Euripides as the source of the plot and summarizes the story of *Medea*, underlining her magical powers and her intervention in support of Jason. Rame then points out the crucial aspect from the myth of *Medea* which she will use, namely, Jason's betrayal and abandonment of *Medea* for a younger woman — an action, she adds, which is extremely common in our day. *Medea's* reaction, however, Rame continues, is different from the depression or suicidal instinct which characterizes many abandoned women: she plans to take revenge by killing their children. Rame concludes her prologue by warning the audience not to take this action literally but metaphorically. In her *Medea* the killing of the children is no longer, as in Euripides, caused by jealousy. Rather, it becomes a gesture of rebellion against the patriarchal exploitation of women. This, she announces, is 'the most politically feminist piece in the whole show'.¹⁶ She then dedicates it to her female audience.¹⁷

Throughout the performance Rame is the only person on stage. Covering various roles, she is both the women of Corinth, announcing that Jason has abandoned *Medea* and has planned to marry a younger woman, and *Medea*, who has shut herself inside her home and refuses to come out. This theatrical technique stresses the protagonist's 'split personality': her passage from an initial phase of dejection, to rebellion, to doubt, to final resolution.

In the first part of this work the plot follows closely Euripides' model: *Medea* exits her home, talks with the women of Corinth, creates a plan to take revenge on Jason, meets her husband and finally executes her plan to kill her children. The revisionist aspects of the play, then, do not reside so much in the plot itself as in a different understanding of the tragic events. In the first place, Rame's *Medea* soon discovers and denounces the women of Corinth's endorsement of patriarchal society. Although, in fact, they support *Medea* as well and try to comfort her, the women of Corinth do so by explaining that what has happened to her — being abandoned for a younger woman — is normal, so normal that they call it 'the law of this world'.¹⁸ Given that this is the way the world goes, they advise *Medea* to accept her destiny, not to pine for what she has lost. Rame's *Medea*, however, rebels against such a notion, declaring instead that the Corinthian women are themselves partly at fault for men's acting this way since they not only accept this 'law' but also proclaim it

as sacred. To calm Medea down the women of Corinth then try a different tactic. They ask her to accept her fate for the sake of her children: Medea should behave not as a jealous woman but as a 'worthy mother'.¹⁹ Rame's Medea then realizes that patriarchal society uses motherhood as a means of oppressing women. It is at this point that the protagonist decides to stop being the passive victim of patriarchal society: she refuses what she calls 'the yoke' of motherhood.²⁰ The piece ends with Medea contemplating the killing of her children, aware that from the death of her children she will be reborn a new woman.

The final lines of the play in the original Italian, however, suggest the possibility of a different ending. The protagonist, conscious that she will go down in history as a murderous, unnatural beast, concludes by saying: 'Ed eo, me dirò chiagnendo: "Mori! Mori! Pe' fa' nascere 'na donna nova... Mori! Pe' fa' nascere 'na donna nova!" [And I, I will tell myself, crying: 'Die! Die! To give birth to a new woman... Die! To give birth to a new woman!']'.²¹ Medea uses the 'tu' (second-person-singular) form, which creates ambiguity for the Italian audience: is Medea talking to one of her children, as one would expect, or to herself, as she says? Whom will she kill at the end? All the various English translations of the final lines of the play lose the ambiguity of the original text and add a stage direction that would see the protagonist, in a moment of affirmation and self-definition, shout her final words.²² Rame, however, pronounces her last lines quite differently.²³ Her final words are hardly triumphant; rather, they are more the anguished, agonizing, soft lament of a woman who is killing the best of herself, hoping for a possible, though unlikely rebirth.

Rame's *Medea* has sparked the interest of many critics over the years for its special role in the actress's repertoire. Marga Cottino-Jones, in one of the first critical essays to consider Rame as a writer, defined this monologue as the 'highest point' in Rame's quest to stage women's issues.²⁴ Cottino-Jones further argued that in the play Rame 'challenges the patriarchal representation of woman as wife and mother' by denouncing and refusing the 'sacrificial role' that the women of the chorus propose.²⁵ Thus, Cottino-Jones continued, Medea's 'is the voice of rebellion against the law of men that has invented [...] a moral blackmail with which to silence them'.²⁶ In fact, Cottino-Jones concluded, the most striking aspect of this performance is that at the end we hear Medea's lone voice: 'No male voice, Jason's or others', interrupts or silences Medea's.²⁷ Rame's 'subversive female voice' on stage makes of this piece, according to Cottino-Jones, 'one of the most disruptive texts of Italian feminist theater'.²⁸

Theatre scholar Jennifer Jones underlined a different aspect of the play: that Rame claimed this Medea was 'discovered', not written, by her and Fo and presented to the audience in the same archaic dialect in which they found it.²⁹ Thus, Jones argued, Rame 'distances herself from the role of the writer', claiming a stronger authenticity for her dramatic interpretation.³⁰ Jones, moreover, noted that Rame's *Medea* comes at the end of a performance in which the many female protagonists, victims of various forms of exploitation, become aware of and sometimes even rebel against their condition of oppression. Finally, as 'their collective anger builds over the course of the evening [...] the last woman takes the stage; this is Medea, the

quintessential rebel, the embodiment of female rage.³¹ Thus did Jones define *Medea* as 'the culmination of Rame's [...] theatrical denaturalization of femininity' which deconstructs the 'oppressive gender ideologies' created by classical tradition.³²

In her book on *Gender and the Italian Stage* Maggie Günsberg, on the other hand, expressed a very different opinion, defining as 'unfortunate' any association of Rame's *Medea* with feminism.³³ Günsberg argued that Rame's revision fails as a feminist text because the protagonist does not recognize 'her own acquiescence with patriarchal motherhood', for she treats her children as something that she has procreated for their father.³⁴ Günsberg faulted the play in as much as it 'falls into the erroneous belief that the complete destruction of motherhood, rather than its reinterpretation and reappropriation' will allow women to redefine themselves.³⁵ Günsberg's provocative comments, however, seem to indicate a reading of Rame's *Medea* which did not take into consideration its historical background and its origin in the early stages of Italian feminist theatre — 'a theatre that broke with the past, attacked, set up barricades', in the words of Dacia Maraini.³⁶ Günsberg instead read this play with the eyes of a much later feminism — a feminism which had already destroyed and was ready to rebuild, a feminism which had transcended the refusal of motherhood as a form of patriarchal oppression and had re-appropriated it as a form of growth and self-definition. This newer form of feminism was already taking shape in Boggio's play *Medea* of 1981 — a play written only a few years after Rame's but which represented the more complex stage of self-awareness the Italian women's movement was beginning to reach in those years.

Maricla Boggio's *Medea* (1981)

Together with Dacia Maraini, Edith Bruck and Annabella Cerliani, Boggio was one of the original founders in 1973 of the first Italian all-women theatre, 'La Maddalena', where she worked as theatre director. She then moved on to write a number of award-winning plays, many of them based on characters from the classical tradition, such as Phaedra, Antigone and Orpheus.³⁷

In Boggio's 1981 *Medea*, the protagonist is a contemporary woman who is simply trying to make sense of a very common event — her husband's betrayal. As the play opens, she is sitting on a psychoanalyst's bed. The audience comes to understand that this imagined psychoanalytical session causes her to double, during the course of the play, as the prototype of the 'betrayed woman': the classical Medea. Thus, during the development of Boggio's play, the protagonist at times abandons her own voice and quotes passages from a variety of traditional 'Medeas': from Cherubini, Euripides and Seneca to Corneille, Niccolini and Anouilh.³⁸ These literary quotations, appropriated by Boggio's protagonist, show the various patterns of behaviour that were considered inevitable for the 'betrayed woman': jealousy, hatred and desire for revenge. 'It is as though every one of those behaviours', the playbill for the 1981 staging stated, 'is stratified within her own personality of woman'.³⁹

Boggio's *Medea*, however, finally refuses the role models of the literary canon. This play, first, suggests that a betrayed woman need not fall prey to hatred and revenge; second, it proposes an alternative, a way for a modern woman to be a wife,

a mother, but above all her own person. Boggio's *Medea* stages a process of interior, growth in the protagonist by transforming traditional elements from the story: the relationship between Medea and her 'rival'; the way in which this relationship contributes to the protagonist's process of maturation; and the final decision about killing the children.

Medea's rival, in Boggio's play, is not only younger; she is also presented as a member of the feminist movement. By meeting with her and other women from the group, Medea discovers that women are connected through a common destiny of exploitation and suffering. After an initial period of jealousy and mistrust she establishes a bond of friendship with Jason's lover, almost a mother-daughter relationship. In this bond, however, it is the younger woman who 'mothers' the older, showing her new possibilities for life. Thus the gifts the two women exchange, the dress and the necklace, which since Euripides have represented betrayal, hatred and death, now become symbols of solidarity and love. Not only do they connect Medea and the young woman, they also help to create a connection with all the other women, who now join in song and dance in a sort of 'Ring Around the Rosie':

Te lo diedi
e fu un dono naturale
naturalmente accettato...
Avevi un paio di blue jeans; sopra
hai infilato la veste bianca
e subito sei diventata una bambina,
e danzavi felice
mentre le altre si univano alla danza
e cantavano...⁴⁰

[I gave it to you
and it was a spontaneous gift
spontaneously accepted ...
You were wearing a pair of blue jeans; over them
you put on the white dress
and immediately you became a little girl,
and you danced with joy
while the other women joined the dance
and sang]

The canonical Medea's second means of revenge, of course, was to kill her children by Jason. Boggio's Medea, in fact, has already killed some of her children — her unborn children. She has secretly aborted them to preserve the unity of the family, for love of Jason, so that he would not be jealous of them, so that he would not have to share Medea's attention with so many others:

Li spensi prima che venissero alla luce
nella cavità oscura del mio ventre,
li spensi con dolore ma con fermezza,
per amore della loro impossibile felicità,
per amore di [mio marito] figlio più grande
bisognoso d'affetto, geloso di dividerlo con chiunque,
quelli furono i miei delitti.⁴¹

[I stifled them before they saw the light of day
in the obscure hollow of my womb,
I stifled them with pain but firmly,
out of love for their impossible happiness,
out of love for my husband, my eldest child
who needed love, who didn't want to share it with anybody,
those were my crimes.]

This contrast between the abortions — which she has already had — and the possible killing of her children — which she ultimately decides not to carry out — illustrates Medea's changed attitude towards her marriage and towards herself. At the end of the play, in fact, the protagonist finds the idea of killing her children unthinkable as she realizes they are a part of herself. By the end of the play Medea has learnt to think in terms of benefit or harm to herself and not, as before, in terms of Jason's happiness.

Moreover, Boggio shows that the essential moments in Medea's 'conscientization' are connected to her relationship with other women. She is able to transcend her initial desire for revenge — which was in line with the traditional character of Medea — when she forms a bond with the women of the feminist movement. Unlike Euripides' women of Corinth, the feminist women do not simply offer silent, sympathetic support, but rather open Medea's life to another reality: one in which women leave their homes to join forces and support one another, one in which women, as they would during many public occasions in the 1970s and 80s, share in joy, celebration, song and dance. Finally, Boggio shows that, through her relationship with Jason's new partner, Medea experiences her own rebirth, one in which love, solidarity and self-respect take the place of hatred, jealousy and self-effacement. The protagonist learns to see her experience not as an individual occurrence, but as part of a larger pattern of exploitation which includes many other women — including Jason's lover. She concludes that she has acquired a sense of her own suffering, and personal growth, by sharing with other women the common experience of failure and pain. It is through this rebirth and maturation, in solidarity with other women, that Medea will finally make decisions based on her *own* wishes and not those of Jason.

Stressing the solidarity among women as the catalyst of conscientization for her Medea, Boggio in fact underlines what have been considered the two main characteristics of Italian feminism: the processes of *autocoscienza* and *affidamento*. *Autocoscienza* is the Italian word for the process of self-discovery which helped with 'establishing a collective sense of self with other women'.⁴² It is significant that Boggio's Medea shares her anguish not only with the women of the feminist movement in the play, but also with her audience in the theatre. In her prologue, Rame explicitly stated that she hoped her spectators would go home transformed after watching her play.⁴³ Boggio's play, by using the process of *autocoscienza*, implicitly hopes to reach the same goal. The relationship of entrustment or *affidamento*, on the other hand, ties a woman to another woman in a connection that empowers both. Mirna Cicioni defines *affidamento* as the 'recognition of, and reliance on, difference in competence between women',⁴⁴ pointing out that the word in Italian 'has the connotation of *dependence, reliance and trust*'.⁴⁵ While *affidamento* can be seen as a

symbolic redefinition of the mother–daughter relationship⁴⁶ and is therefore mostly understood as a younger woman gaining from her relationship with an older, more experienced one, in her *Medea* Boggio shows how in fact both women — the Medea character and the Glauké character — acquire understanding, wisdom and self-respect through their relationship with each other.

Boggio also subverts the traditional concept of Medea's 'unnatural motherhood'. Her Medea recalls how she was at first like a mother to her husband in order to satisfy him;⁴⁷ how she killed her unborn children not out of jealousy or hatred, but out of love for Jason, her 'eldest son'.⁴⁸ This sort of unnatural motherhood kept Medea in a position of inferiority, of passivity. By the end of the play, however, Boggio shows that Medea has severed the umbilical cord which tied her to Jason and is finally able fully to accept her responsibility towards her real children, choosing her children over Jason. Boggio's *Medea* embodies that era of feminist myth-making that sought and offered 'instructions for survival'. A contemporary audience, on the other hand, may be left with a sense of dissatisfaction by many of the solutions it proposes, such as the lack of discussion on the issue of abortion; the almost folkloristic aspects of the 1970s Italian feminist movement it stages; the relationship between Medea and Jason's new partner; and, finally, the destiny of this woman, which the play never really considers. Nevertheless, during the era of feminism this play has come to represent, the message of solidarity between the two women, as opposed to the traditional rivalry, and the call for survival for all involved, would have found a sympathetic audience.

Emma Dante's *Medea* (2004)

About twenty-five years separate these two revisionist Medeas and the next text, which marks a return to Euripides' tragedy and to a more traditional theatre. Its director, Emma Dante, shows in her works a different understanding of women's condition from that prevalent in the explosive times of the nascent Italian feminism. Born in 1967, after theatre studies and a short acting career in mainland Italy Dante returned to her native Sicily. There she received the Ubu Prize for the best original Italian play two years in a row: in 2002 for *mPalermu* and in 2003 for *Carnezzzeria*, both of which she wrote and directed. Neither of these two works, set in the poorest neighbourhoods of Palermo, Sicily's largest city, seems at first sight to have much in common with Greek tragedy. However, referring to these early works critics such as Gerardo Guccini and Claudio Meldolesi have mentioned qualities that do indicate a connection: 'the dialectics between the individuals and their social community' and the dramaturgy which 'compensates for history's immutability with touching rituals of purification' are both elements which appear in Greek tragedy.⁴⁹ Meldolesi and Guccini have also noticed how these two early plays by Dante explore the themes of the impossibility of change and atonement, of ritual suspensions and sacrificial expiations.⁵⁰ Finally, Dante herself claimed that the protagonists of her first plays, members of the urban underclass, were all 'mythological' — because of their feelings of superiority over death and because of interior enigmas which Dante, their creator, claims she herself cannot solve.⁵¹ In retrospect, all these features appear

to point to Dante's interest in Greek tragedy which ultimately leads to her direction of Euripides' *Medea* in 2004.⁵²

This last *Medea* is in many ways very different from the others. Unlike the revisions from the latter part of the twentieth century, Dante's staging of *Medea* is not a one-woman play which privileges the female voice but a play with a full cast of characters. The director has, to use her own words, 'respected the soul and the structure' of Euripides' tragedy;⁵³ her work follows the main events of Euripides' plot, keeping the chorus on stage and assigning all violence to off-stage. Moreover, Dante has retained the principal speeches as well: Medea's speech on the unfortunate destiny of women; Creon's exile orders; Medea's announcement of her plan; the messenger's report on the deaths of Jason's new bride and her father; and the three dialogues between Medea and Jason: the first when she reminds him of all she did for him and he explains the reasons for his new marriage; the second when Medea, supposedly accepting Jason's reasons, asks her children be allowed to bring gifts to his new bride; and the final one when Jason asks in vain at least to touch the bodies of their dead children. As for the main cuts, Dante has eliminated the character of Aegeus and his support for Medea, thus creating an ending which is quite different from the original in spirit, if not in letter.

Although she has mostly held to the original plot, it would be misleading to say that Dante simply directed Euripides' play since, although her name is not listed as the author, she has certainly added to the original text. However, the innovations effected by Dante are to be found less in the plot or in the principal dialogues than in the language, the use of the female body, the setting, the choruses and the mix between pagan and Christian traditions. For example, in Dante's *Medea*, the main protagonists — the foreigner Medea, Jason, Creon and the priest/messenger — use standard Italian, taking their lines directly from Euripides' tragedy. The members of the chorus, on the other hand, speak a mixture of Southern Italian dialects from Sicily, Naples and Apulia. The contrast between standard Italian and dialect in this staging marks the belonging not so much to particular geographical locations as to different social classes. The lines in dialect, all created by Dante and used only by the chorus, further emphasize the function of the chorus as the bearer of popular wisdom on the one hand and comic relief on the other.

Another particularly significant element of Dante's staging is the use of the female body, an element immediately announced by the image on the playbill and the poster of the play. A pregnant woman's body — like an ancient statue ripped apart by a fracture in her womb — introduces a Medea heavy with child who, in high heels, can barely walk on stage and yet manages to make her body sensually attractive to those she wants to seduce. Medea's visible signs of fertility stand in opposition to the sterility of the city: she is not merely the only woman on stage but also the only woman in Corinth. The women of the chorus, who share the affliction and desperation caused by Jason's abandonment, are all played by men in drag. However, apart from their clothes no attempt is made to disguise their masculinity, beards, hairy chests or deep voices. The men of the chorus, who play the role of the women of Corinth and carry Southern women's names — Caterina, Rosetta, Mimma, Giuseppina and Pupella — appear obsessed by Medea's

pregnancy and by the fact that, as the play opens, she is due to give birth at any moment. They dream about having children of their own; discuss the best diet for pregnant women; prepare little clothes for newborn babies and quibble over the traditional hanging of blue or pink ribbons on the door upon the birth of a child. Although their appearance, gossip and quarrelling provide comic relief to the tragic atmosphere, Dante had another purpose in mind when she chose men for the chorus: to present a Medea who is the only bearer of life in a land that has lost its capacity to procreate. Thus, Medea's real crime, comments the director in her production notes, is that she denies her children not only to Jason but to the entire city, which without her will have lost any hope of survival.⁵⁴

In this staging the power of Medea's physical presence is equalled by the introduction of Christian elements into the classical tragedy through a setting which emphasizes the centrality of the church in the life of the citizens of Corinth and the use of sacraments as part of the performance. When Medea first appears on stage, for example, she emerges through the church doors. These same doors, which create the different settings of the play — the houses of the women of Corinth, the town square, Creon's palace — are in the second act moved to create a confessional, where Medea will confess to the priest her plan to avenge Jason's betrayal. The church appears again in a wedding ceremony — a memory of the union between Medea and Jason and a prefiguration of the new nuptials between Jason and Creon's daughter — as well as in the baptism which Medea requests for her five newborn babies when it appears the citizens of Corinth may try to murder them.⁵⁵ This initiation ritual of death and rebirth, however, then changes into an act of murder when Medea drowns her children in the same baptismal water. The character of the confessor acquires further importance, furthermore, when he finally realizes Medea's plan to kill Jason's new bride but, because of his vow to secrecy in all matters related to the sacrament of confession, becomes an unwilling accomplice to the murder of her babies.

After the vicious confession and murderous baptism, then, which bring only death with no possibility of rebirth, the play ends with another distorted version of a Christian sacrament: in the last scene of the play, after Medea has denied Jason's request to touch the bodies of his dead children, the five women of Corinth line up to receive the Eucharist from the priest. What they are actually given, however, are clothes pegs that they will use to hang on a line which joins all the houses of the town the dripping baptismal clothes of the drowned babies. Throughout this final scene — which sees a destroyed, powerless Jason centre-stage, surrounded by the clothes of newborn babies while Medea's figure becomes almost hidden by the shadows on the side of the stage — the audience listens to a Sicilian version of the 'Ave Maria'. Its clear reference to the fruits of a woman's womb on the one hand and to the moment of death on the other underscores this mixture of paganism and Christianity, life and death, which runs throughout Dante's version of *Medea*.

The music that marks the separation between scenes and is performed on stage throughout the play signals the presence of elements of traditional Christian rituals as well. By moving across the stage in-between scenes or noticeably sitting on the side looking at the action, the voices of this alternative chorus replicate the sounds

of suffering heard in the representation of the Passion of Christ still performed during Holy Week in many Southern Italian towns. The incomprehensibility of the singing helps to accentuate its emotional content so that, as the playbill states, 'the nasal sounds of the voice contribute to suggest a dark and painful path where a song for Medea becomes, in fact, Medea's lament'.⁵⁶

Most reviewers have noted the presence of these Christian elements in this staging of Euripides' tragedy. Francesco Urbano suggested it be read in a Christological light, that is, that Medea, because of her full awareness of the inevitability of her destiny, portrays a Christ figure.⁵⁷ Dante has made no explicit reference to a Christological interpretation but has claimed that all her theatre is based on matriarchy, as Sicilian families are all matriarchal. By this she means that women are central in the family, not that they hold the power. In fact, quoting Medea as an example, she has further explained that women will be the ones who make the decision but also the ones who will be defeated.⁵⁸ The final scene of this play, which centres on Jason rather than Medea and which forgets the possibility of her flight on a chariot drawn by dragons, seems to confirm this interpretation. On the other hand, the centrality of Jason on stage during the ceremony which brings together the Eucharist and the mourning for the killing of the innocents points to his guilt and takes away responsibility from the character of Medea.

'Medea is *par excellence* the woman who gives everything for love and in return receives betrayal and abandonment', summarizes the director.⁵⁹ Such a prosaic interpretation has left some reviewers dissatisfied: 'Rather than a reenactment of one of the greatest classics of ancient drama, this seems more like a newspaper story which never does succeed in reinterpreting myth', commented Clara Gebbia.⁶⁰ Giulia Tellini added that Dante had 'adopted Medea believing that she was an orphan of Euripides'.⁶¹ Such comments seem appropriate to Dante's staging, whose purpose was, as she said, 'to take away the Medeis from Medea'.⁶² However, Dante has not just taken away. In her unorthodox, highly symbolic, multi-lingual interpretation of Euripides' play she has followed Rame and Boggio in choosing Medea's motherhood as the pivotal aspect of her heroine. Dante's pregnant Medea reminds the audience of the power of fertility — and of the tragic consequences when this power comes accompanied by feelings of powerlessness. Dante's use of Christian symbolism throughout the play suggests a continuity between Greek and modern times which underlines the presence of sacrificial victims. Medea's children are drowned, not reborn, in a baptismal font. The protagonist herself disappears among the shadows, not into the clouds in a chariot drawn by dragons. There is no redemption in Dante's *Medea* — only suffering.

Dante's *Medea* is certainly far removed from the feminist revisions of the 1970s and 1980s which either justified or even removed from Medea the charge of infanticide. Rame and Boggio, in their revisions of the character of Medea, expressed the ideals of the early Italian feminist movement. Rame, in the earlier monologue, protested against women's oppression and against women's complicity with patriarchal ideals, refusing the role of the noble, self-sacrificing and self-effacing mother figure. Boggio, in a later play, offered an alternative solution for her female protagonist and her audience, that of solidarity with other women and re-appropriation of motherhood.

Dante's staging of Euripides' tragedy in 2004 does not so much express the ideals of these early waves of the feminist movement as the ambiguities of a generation that takes for granted the victories of the feminist movement without sharing its certainties. Dante neither looks for justifications for the main character nor simply tries to transfer ancient events into a contemporary setting. Rather, she provides a sense of tragedy for a modern, disenchanted audience. Although the declarations on her intentions in staging Euripides may sometimes sound contradictory, there is no doubt about the goals she has reached. She has created a set which combines Greek and Christian cultures, suggesting an uninterrupted tradition of misogyny; she has asked her spectators to feel that, at least in a Mediterranean culture, women are still used and abandoned. At the same time, however, she has brought to light the tragic fact that women also still kill and innocents still die. Especially in the play's final scene, with its exceptional 'mythical and sacral charge',⁶³ Dante has created a powerful reminder for a contemporary audience of the connections between a mythical past and a tragic present.

Notes to Chapter 15

I would like to express my gratitude to Maricla Boggio for her generous sharing of publications and informal chats on women and theatre in Italy over the years; to the Press Office of the Teatro Mercadante in Naples, particularly Francesca Nicodemo, for sending me poster, playbill, reviews and a videotaped version of Emma Dante's adaptation of *Medea*; and to Emma Dante, who kindly sent me a copy of the unpublished script of her play.

1. Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. by Serena Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Aine O'Healy (Cambridge: Polity, 1995), p. 3.
2. Adrienne Rich, 'When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision', in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), pp. 33-49 (p. 35).
3. Alicia Ostriker, 'The Thieves of Language: Women Poets and Revisionist Mythmaking', in *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory*, ed. by Elaine Showalter (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), pp. 314-38 (p. 318).
4. Rich, p. 35.
5. Ostriker, p. 318. The idea of 'survival' appears not only in the activity of re-writing but also in that of 're-reading', as in Judith Fetterley's now classic description of a 'resisting reader'. Building on Rich's words, Fetterley concludes that 'we must learn to re-read. Thus, I see my book as a self-defense survival manual for the woman reader.' Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. vii (emphasis added).
6. Nancy S. Reinhardt, 'New Directions for Feminist Criticism in the Theatre and the Related Arts', in *A Feminist Perspective in the Academy: The Difference it Makes*, ed. by Elizabeth Langland and Walter Grove (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 25-51 (p. 29).
7. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 68.
8. Reinhardt, p. 33.
9. Reinhardt, pp. 44-45.
10. Reinhardt, p. 46.
11. See Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum, *liberazione della donna: feminism in italy* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1986), pp. 89-90. On the same topic, also see Flavia Laviosa, '1970s: A Decade of Legislative Reforms for Italian Women's Protection and Equality', *Italian Politics and Society*, 47 (1997), 57-63.
12. Other recent revisions of *Medea* by Italian women playwrights include Raffaella Battaglini's *Altri tempi, Hystrio*, 3 (1993), 168-69; Elisabetta Pozzi's *Medea: Paltra*, based on Christa Wolf's

- novel, which premiered in 2000; and Grazia Verasani's play *From Medea* (Milan: Sironi Editore, 2004).
13. On the collaborative writing method of Fo and Rame, see Jaqueline Gawler and Stephen Kolsky, 'Co-authorship in *Tutta casa, letto e chiesa: The Writing of the Monologhi*', *AUMLA*, 102 (2004), 85-103.
 14. Serena Anderlini, 'When Is a Woman's Work Her Own? An Interview with Franca Rame', *Feminist Issues*, 11 (1991), 23-52 (p. 29). A recent critical biography of Rame in English is Sydney Cheek O'Donnell, 'An Exaggerated Life: Franca Rame on the Political Stage' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Washington, 2004). See also Concetta D'Angeli, 'Proprio una figlia d'arte', in *Coppia d'arte. Dario Fo e Franca Rame*, ed. by Concetta D'Angeli and Simone Soriani (Pisa: Edizioni Plus — Pisa University Press, 2006), pp. 19-44.
 15. All translations from Italian in this essay are mine, unless stated otherwise.
 16. Dario Fo and Franca Rame, *Medea*, in *Le commedie di Dario Fo VIII. Venticinque monologhi per una donna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), pp. 67-75 (p. 67).
 17. English translations of this play often do not include the prologue. Estelle Parsons's adaptation is the only exception: Franca Rame and Dario Fo, *Medea Prologue*, in *Orgasmo Adulto Escapes from the Zoo*, adapted by Estelle Parsons (New York: Broadway Plays, 1985), pp. 52-55.
 18. Fo and Rame, p. 71.
 19. Fo and Rame, p. 71.
 20. Fo and Rame, p. 74.
 21. Fo and Rame, p. 75.
 22. The English translation by Gillian Hanna specifies that the last line of the play has to be 'at the top of her voice'. Franca Rame and Dario Fo, *Medea*, in *A Woman Alone and Other Plays*, trans. by Gillian Hanna (London: Methuen Drama, 1991), pp. 61-67 (p. 67). Stuart Hood's translation adds a 'shouting' for the last line. Dario Fo and Franca Rame, *Medea*, in *Female Parts: One Woman Plays*, trans. by Stuart Hood (London: Pluto Press, 1981), pp. 36-40 (p. 40). In Estelle Parsons's adaptation, the stage direction prescribes a 'high voice' for the last line. Franca Rame and Dario Fo, *Medea*, in *Orgasmo Adulto Escapes from the Zoo*, adapted by Parsons, pp. 56-60 (p. 60).
 23. Video-recorded performance of 1991. Dario Fo, *Monologhi da fabulazzo osceno e Mistero buffo. Con la partecipazione di Franca Rame* (CTRF 1991).
 24. Marga Cottino-Jones, 'Franca Rame on Stage: The Militant Voice of a Resisting Woman', *Italica*, 72 (1995), 323-39 (p. 337). A longer, updated version of this essay was republished as 'The Transgressive Voice of a Resisting Woman', in *Franca Rame: A Woman on Stage*, ed. by Walter Valeri (West Lafayette, IN: Bordighera, 2000), pp. 8-56.
 25. Cottino-Jones, p. 335.
 26. Cottino-Jones, p. 337.
 27. Cottino-Jones, p. 337.
 28. Cottino-Jones, p. 337.
 29. Fo and Rame, p. 70. In an interview Rame said that in fact the idea for this *Medea* belonged to her and that Fo had developed it. 'It's not true', she stated, 'that we found inspiration for her in the Umbro-Tuscan Maggi' (Anderlini, p. 31).
 30. Jennifer Jones, *Medea's Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who Kills* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003), p. 98.
 31. Jones, p. 97.
 32. Jones, pp. 97-98.
 33. Maggie Günsberg, *Gender and the Italian Stage: From the Renaissance to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 226.
 34. Günsberg, p. 227.
 35. Günsberg, p. 227.
 36. Quoted in Susan E. Bassnett-McGuire, 'Towards a Theory of Women's Theatre', in *Semiotics of Drama and Theatre: New Perspectives in the Theory of Drama and Theatre*, ed. by Herta Schmid and Aloysius Van Kesteren (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1984), pp. 445-66 (p. 455).
 37. See her excellent website <www.mariclaboggio.it> for updated information on her publications and stagings.

38. For a more in-depth discussion of Boggio's use of quotations from literary classics, see: Daniela Cavallaro, 'A New Role Model for the Betrayed Woman: *Medea* by Maricla Boggio', *Text and Presentation*, 15 (1994), 19–23.
39. Maricla Boggio, Playbill. *Medea* (Rome: Teatro Flaiano, 1981).
40. Maricla Boggio. *Medea. Ridotto* 1–2 (1981), pp. 80–100 (p. 91).
41. Boggio, p. 85.
42. Lucia Re, 'Diotima's Dilemmas: Authorship, Authority, Authoritarianism', in *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference*, ed. by Graziella Parati and Rebecca West (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 2002), pp. 50–74 (p. 58). Although *autocoscienza* is often compared to the consciousness-raising groups which emerged in many parts of the Western world in the 1970s, Re underlines how the word 'autocoscienza' itself stresses a 'self-determined' and 'self-directed quality' of the process of conscientization.
43. Fo and Rame, 'Prologo', in *Le commedie di Dario Fo VIII. Venticinque monologhi per una donna* (Turin: Einaudi, 1989), pp. 5–9 (p. 9).
44. Mirna Cicioni, "'Love and Respect, Together": The Theory and Practice of Affidamento in Italian Feminism', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 10 (1989), 71–83 (p. 71).
45. Cicioni, p. 76.
46. Carol Lazzaro-Weis, 'The Concept of Difference in Italian Feminist Thought: Mothers, Daughters, Heretics', in *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice*, pp. 31–49 (p. 34). Further discussion of the practice of *affidamento* and the debates it has caused can be found in Susanna Scarparo, 'In the Name of the Mother: Sexual Difference and the Practice of "Entrustment"', *Cultural Studies Review*, 11 (2005), 36–48.
47. Boggio, p. 81.
48. Boggio, p. 85.
49. Gerardo Guccini and Claudio Meldolesi, 'Presentazione', in 'Il teatro di Emma Dante. Appunti sulla ricerca di un metodo', *Prove di drammaturgia*, 1 (2004), 21–35 (p. 21).
50. Guccini and Meldolesi, pp. 21–22.
51. 'Entrevista a Emma Dante', *Intramuros* 2005, <<http://www.grupointramuros.com/revista>> [accessed 6 April 2010].
52. *Medea*, from Euripides, adapted and directed by Emma Dante, premiered at the Teatro Mercadante in Naples on 28 January 2004.
53. Cristina Piccino, "'Medea", la condanna della fertilità', *Il manifesto*, 28 January 2004, p. 14.
54. Emma Dante, 'Playbill', *Medea* (Teatro Mercadante, 2004).
55. The number of the children corresponds to the number of the members of the chorus.
56. Fratelli Mancuso, 'Playbill', *Medea* (Teatro Mercadante, 2004).
57. Francesco Urbano, 'Una "Medea" tra crudeltà e purezza', *Roma*, 30 January 2004.
58. 'Entrevista a Emma Dante'.
59. 'Entrevista a Emma Dante'.
60. Clara Gebbia, 'Le recensioni di "ateatro": Medea da Euripide di Emma Dante', *ateatro*, 65,36 <<http://www.trax.it/olivieropdp/mostrarecensioninew.asp?num=65&ord=36>> [accessed 2 December 2005].
61. Giulia Tellini, 'Medea nel siculo purgatorio "dantesco"', www.drammaturgia.it, 10 March 2004, <<http://www.drammaturgia.it/recensioni/recensione1.php?id=1743>> [accessed 11 October 2005].
62. Tellini, 'Medea nel siculo purgatorio "dantesco"'.
63. Massimo Fusillo, 'La Medea di Emma Dante', *Primafila*, May 2004, <<http://isie2002.univaq.it/culturateatrale/materiali/Fusillo/fusillo-indi.php>> [accessed 6 April 2010].

CHAPTER 16



Myth and Ritual in *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* Cherríe Moraga's Xicana-Indígena Interpretation of Euripides' *Medea*

Paula Straile-Costa

Myths can be read as stories repeated so often they seem to contain unquestionable truths about reality, explanations as to the way things are and why. As expressions of a culture's most cherished values, myths often justify dominant systems of power and order. Rewriting myths is a potent strategy for activists and artists who critique these 'master narratives' and the systems they shore up. Brushing traditional narratives against the grain, these authors rewrite mythic materials in such a way as to empower those whose cultures have been denied or denigrated in the 'master narrative'. The myth of *Medea* has been employed to curtail female behaviour in some instances, such as Ovid's or Seneca's didactic portrayals of her as a witch and an example of dark, unrestrained passions. In other tellings, it is put to women's defence. Euripides' version has been read as critical of Jason's oath-breaking to the degree that Medea's vengeance may be seen as justified.¹

Chicana lesbian poet and playwright Cherríe Moraga reinterprets the story of Euripides' *Medea* in her *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* in such a way.² The play consists of an interweaving of *Mexicano*³ and Aztec myths with Euripides' *Medea*, a work particularly apt for discussion of the themes of sexual betrayal, vengeance and infanticide in these American myths. Moraga achieves this by combining Euripides' *Medea* with figures of the fallen or maligned indigenous woman in Aztec, Mexican and Chicano myth and legend who share some of classical Greek Medea's characteristics: La Llorona, a frightful spirit of a woman who drowns her children in revenge for sexual betrayal; the moon goddess Coyolxauhqui, daughter of the female goddess Coatlicue, who ends up dismembered by her brother Huitzilopochli; and Hungry Woman, whose body, covered with hungry mouths, is broken by the gods to create the earth and sky.⁴ Moraga rewrites the meanings of these American myths in their conventional use and questions both their construction of an ethnic gender and sexual identity and their use to justify women's oppression, punishment and/or exile. Moraga places her Medea in a Chicana/o borderland context, adding