

S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

6:1 2020

Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents

Edited by Rosy Colombo

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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Published in June 2020

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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies

<http://skenejournal.skeneproject.it>

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Contents

Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents

Edited by Rosy Colombo

ROSY COLOMBO – <i>Introduction</i>	5
MONICA CENTANNI – <i>The Queen on Stage. Female Figures of Regality in Aeschylus</i>	21
NADIA FUSINI – <i>One, Two, Many Medeas</i>	45
ANTON BIERL – <i>Phaedra: a Tragic Queen in Turmoil Between Violent Love and Its Chaste Suppression. An Interpretation of Euripides' Hippolytus in Initiatory Terms</i>	57
GUIDO AVEZZÙ – <i>The (Frustrated?) Regality of Electra</i>	85
ANTONIO ZIOSI – <i>Wounds and Flames: Dido and Her Sisters</i>	113
MICHAEL NEILL – <i>A "Monstruous Empire": Queenly Power in Anthony and Cleopatra</i>	155
MARISA SESTITO – <i>Unveiling Jocasta. The Brave Queen of Dryden and Lee</i>	179

Miscellany

MILAN KROULÍK – <i>"What is expected has not been accomplished". A Historical Materialist Approach to Attic Tragedy</i>	197
MICHAEL CARROLL – <i>Prophetic Deception: The Narrative of the Chariot Race in Sophocles' Electra</i>	219

Special Section

GHERARDO UGOLINI – <i>"Man is a terrifying miracle": Sophocles' Antigone Staged by Massimiliano Civica. An Interview with the Director</i>	243
PAUL A. CANTOR – <i>Patrick Gray, Shakespeare and the Fall of the Roman Republic: Selfhood, Stoicism and Civil War, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, pp. 308</i>	255
ELENA PELLONE – <i>Jaq Bessell, Shakespeare in Action, London and New York: Bloomsbury (The Arden Shakespeare), 2019, pp. 213</i>	265
ROBERT SAWYER – <i>"Fine Young Cannibals": Review of Eating Shakespeare: Cultural Anthropology as Global Methodology, ed. by Anne Sophie Refskou, Marcel Alvaro de Amorim, and Vinicius Mariano de Carvalho, London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019, pp. 301</i>	279
BARRY ALLEN SPENCE – <i>Beckett, Decadence, and the Art of Revisioning. Review of Stanley E. Gontarski, Revisioning Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Decadent Turn, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, pp. 320</i>	287

NADIA FUSINI*

One, Two, Many Medeas

Abstract

Has a woman like Medea ever existed? Will a woman like Medea ever exist? If such a woman has existed, were there to be such a woman, of what would her passionate energy be made? Love? Hate? Will it ever be possible in that *mélange* of drives intermediate between body and psyche – those impulses which according to Plato belong to the irrational sphere of the mind – and to extinguish which would mean severing the nerves of the psyche and cutting off the strings of the bow that assure the energy (cf. Plato, Republic 3.411b); will it ever be possible, in that *mélange*, to distinguish the drive of hate from that of love? Does Medea love? Yes, she does. She also hates. She moves from hate to love and back again as though on a Möbius strip. This essay follows Medea from her appearance in the tragedy of Euripides and on through Seneca to her reincarnation as Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, to her final apparition as Maria Callas in Pasolini's film in 1969. The argument being that Medea remains contemporary.

KEYWORDS: Euripides; Seneca; Shakespeare; Lady Macbeth; Pasolini; Maria Callas

Medea 1

Has there ever existed, will there ever exist such a woman? A woman such as Medea? If she exists, of what substance is her vital energy? And on what passionate substance does she feed? Love? Hate? Will it ever be possible in the *mélange* of intermediate impulses between body and psyche – those impulses which according to Plato belong to the irrational sphere of the mind, and to extinguish which would be tantamount, again according to Plato, to severing the nerves of the soul, and thus cutting the harp strings of energy (cf. Plato, Republic 3.411b)¹ – will it ever be possible in such a *mélange* to distinguish the urge to hate, which divides, from the urge to love, which unites?

¹ On this subject, see Vegetti 1993.

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In a synthetic definitive judgement, Schopenhauer (*Parerga und Paralipomena*, 1851, chap. 21) reminds us that we are all, men and women alike, porcupines: if too close we prick each other, if too distant we feel the cold. This is to say that a relationship of love alone will be so close as to exclude identity, while a relationship of pure hate will cause such repulsion as to allow for no connection. Finding the right balance is an aim most human, so human in fact that often, if not always, it is scotched. Does Medea love? Yes, she does. And she also hates. Or, rather, she slips from love to hate, as on a Möbius strip. As though, on either side, the passions were identical.

I am searching here for Medea's different faces, or sides. On her first appearance – the first we can read, at least² – Medea is the protagonist in Euripides' tragedy named for her. She reappears on stage in Seneca. And in Shakespeare, since he too creates his own Medea whom he calls Lady Macbeth. And lastly, she invades the screen with the face of Maria Callas in Pasolini's 1969 film bearing her name.

So, yes, Medea exists, has existed. The origin of Euripides' character is a legend vouched for by Pausanias in his *Description of Hellas* on his arrival at Corinth, where the woman from the Orient is supposed to have lived (see Bettini and Pucci 2017). Euripides is fascinated by the story of *Medea*, and tries telling it several times over. When, in 431 BC, he finally stages Medea in Corinth, with Jason, he presents a version of the myth entirely his own. No, Medea has not killed her children unwittingly because she wants them to become immortal but gets it wrong. Nor are her innocent children stoned by the women of Corinth, unconscious tools in the cruel hands of the mother who has killed Jason's new bride, a princess of Corinth. Nor, in her flight from Corinth after killing Creon, does Medea abandon her children in the hands of the King's angry relatives, who vent their fury on them and then accuse their mother. No, Medea kills her children to punish Jason who has betrayed her.

In no legend of the time was infanticide by a mother ever mentioned. But this is the act at the core of Euripides' drama. And after him, tradition gives us the inhuman face of a Medea who murders her own children, a vindictive lover, a woman who has turned 'antagonist' through suffering; absolutely, totally dedicated to destroying those she has loved; ready, unhesitatingly, to 'punish' her lover; in the end, even resorting to the inhuman act of destroying those she herself has generated.

Playing with etymology, one might say that Medea is 'anta-gonist', 'an-

² Euripides staged for the first time Medea as a sorceress and as a murderer of King Pelias in 455 (*Pelias' Daughters*); Sophocles as a sorceress in his *The Root-Cutters*, also known in antiquity as Sophocles' *Medea* – see Mastronarde 2002, 48-9 (as for Neophron's *Medea*, see *ibid.* 57-64).

ti-gonal'. Medea goes 'against the born', 'against those who are born'; she goes 'against nature'. In this sense she is a 'warrior'. She is the hero who fights, the woman-hero who is not afraid of using the mortal, deathly violence of conflict to the bitter end. She betrays her father, kills her brother, kills Pelias, abandons her homeland, makes Jason her homeland, cleaves to Jason, and does everything for Jason. But why? Since she loves him? Is this the sign of love? Does she who loves put herself at the total, dedicated service of the loved, the lover? Is it this, love? Is this Eros, this kind of love?

And how does Jason repay her? By betrayal. Once in Corinth, it behoves him to organise his life by arranging a political marriage for himself. He no longer needs the foreigner from Colchis. Pitiless, he consigns her to exile. But he will keep the children: he is their father. At this point Medea's fury is unleashed: when Euripides' tragedy opens, Medea is hidden from view inside the house from which she can be heard howling. Her fury is the other face of the passion of outraged love. A violent passion, absolute.

Up to this point Medea has conceived love as absolute dedication to the other – abnegation of self, negation of homeland, father, brother. Medea loves as she herself says, 'on the front line'. Ready for the clash of love, it is for love that Medea fights. Medea is heroic: she shows daring, the courage typical of a male hero. Euripides uses such terms as *tolma* (394), daring; *thrasos* (856), courage.³

But when she discovers she has been betrayed, Medea slides down the Möbius strip in a state of passionate wrath, *orge* (176). She feels rage, *cholos* (94). She experiences the passionate energy peculiar to a hero, *heros*. Even of a *theos*. She is *deine* (44), terrible, powerful. And *mone* (513), alone; *moria* (457), *mad*. She is an animal, a female bull (92), a lioness (187). She has the inflexible will of a hero. She is entirely the fury of annihilation.

Yes, where she cannot love, Medea hates. Either she loves another and annihilates herself, or she hates and annihilates the other, and by so doing she loses part of herself, something her own. A consequence of the hate she feels is in fact self-mutilation. Because her revenge deprives her of that which is her own, her children.

Medea accepts this law unhesitatingly, a rule, or rather, a fact: love and hate are two sides of the same ferocious attachment, and whoever feels this will always, in all cases, lose personal identity. Proof that there is in any case violence in love; and in love always hate.

Reciprocity in love is rare indeed, Medea reveals. Ferocity and cruelty are often the truth of love. The existence of the woman Medea is the experience of this *eros*, this love-desire manifest in the urge to close adherence, absolute contact with the other, to complete the sacred moment of

³ All quotations from Euripides' *Medea* refer to Diggle 1984.

embrace, when lover and loved one are locked together in the confusion of each other and in each other. It happened to her: she moved towards Jason; for him she tore herself from her home, she entered the Symplegades, the horrid rocks at the entrance to Pontus closing in on the ship that penetrates them in a fatal embrace. It is a very powerful symbolic image, that of the great rocks, the colour of blue lapis lazuli which crash together, choking the entrance to the Bosphorus for anyone wishing to pass through so that it seems the way closes in the wake of the stern, while in front, beyond the prow, there is only danger. An image valid not only for ships, but which infuses the life of our heroes with lugubrious prophetic meanings of life and death: for Medea, Jason's arms are the Symplegades, they open for her, not to hold her, but to swallow her. Which is, if you like, a metaphor for the erotic scene *par excellence*, that of sexual *jouissance*. Is this not exactly what happens to Medea with Jason? Does she not thrust against him, encircle him; does he not take her, then open his arms and drop her?

When Euripides' play opens, Jason has effectively abandoned Medea. He no longer needs her. Medea is a foreigner, but she understands. Medea is indeed the barbarian, the oriental woman used to kneel before despots, the more inclined to obedience the more brutal their power. But she is also a woman who has intelligence of love and hate, is able to understand with perfect lucidity the lot meted out to women in the most civilised city in Greece, which is Athens (where the play is staged, although set in Corinth). To the chorus lamenting her lot, Medea speaks quietly. When she leaves the house where she had despaired and howled and comes on stage, turning to the women, her friends, she speaks firmly, coherently. Not at all madly.

With marriage, she says in her famous monologue (ll. 230-65), women bind their own happiness, honour and reputation to a man, – a man who will do as he pleases with the bond. The very act – marriage – will have different names for the man and the woman: for Jason it will be called 'choice', the exercise of his own 'freedom', to the point that if it serves his purpose to contract a new marriage, he is free to do so. But she will pay for his freedom with repudiation. For Medea, Jason's freedom means rejection, abandonment, exile, solitude. When she chooses a husband, a woman chooses a master, Medea firmly concludes. Hence her wrath: the logical result of her lucid understanding that the wrong she has undergone requires vengeance. It is in the name of justice that she seeks revenge. On vengeance Medea concentrates as on the act to which the injustice of her own misfortune corresponds, caused not by metaphysical reasoning, but calculated in concrete terms by a man for his personal political advantage. And it is vengeance, terrible vengeance, which makes of Medea that which she effectively becomes: an icon of terrible motherhood, the assassin of her own offspring. Medea's act is the scandal of scandals for all eternity.

Medea 2

And now, I am going to take a leap. I call up Seneca's Medea, point to this brazen character who in Seneca's version is yet more dazzling, more blinding. Such brazenness is clearly spelled out in the peremptory assertion Seneca gives her in line 910. When Medea is finally ready for her criminal infanticide, Seneca has her declare openly "Medea nunc sum; crevit ingenium malis" (910),⁴ "Now I am Medea. My genius has grown through evils" (translation mine).

In this new version, that is the *punctum*, as Barthes (1980) would have said. This is the detail which gives away not only the emotional complex, but the content of truth which surprises and disconcerts us. It is in the line: this is how Medea *becomes* what she *is*, as Freud and Nietzsche have so masterfully taught us.

Note that the two Medeas, the Greek and the Latin, even though from such different epochs and in different languages, in fact both confirm the murder of the children as the point at which power to give life becomes power to give death. What Medea takes from her children, life, is what she gave them.

But then, if we think about it, what was that which she gave them, life, if not a way into the world? A deadly experience in itself, for the way into the world has never and will never mean other than progress towards death. Is this then the mother's gift—Death? In Euripides' Medea first, then in Seneca's, they appear as anti-Ariadnes; they do not liberate, but lead the new-born back into the labyrinth of the Underworld. Thanks to an act that is not at all evil. But it is rather a sacred act of theft. "My genius has grown through evils."

Medea 3

This truth – another leap – is evident in Pasolini's hieratic film dedicated to Medea, with the absolutely brilliant idea of giving Medea the face of Maria Callas, who is above all else a voice; thus, that which for everyone is voice, here becomes sight.

It is thus that Pasolini pinpoints another decisive *punctum* of the myth. The infanticide is no sacrilege. On the contrary, Pasolini restores its pious character to the action, presented in slow time, which in itself distances any crime from the act. Thanks to the way in which the image is presented to our visual perception, the act is associated with the sweetness of sleep

⁴ All quotations from Seneca's *Medea* refer to Giardina 1987.

with which their mother endows her children. It is evident that Medea loves her own children. If she kills them, it is because she 'must'. The sense of things cannot consist in their purely and simply continuing to exist; as if we lived merely to safeguard what we were given at birth.

But above all: when Jason thinks he is going to reduce Medea from woman to wife and mother, the mother merely existing to forge children, Medea rebels. Birth is an act of power which Medea claims for herself entirely, and so, as if she were one of the Parcae, she decides that as she has spun it, so now of her own accord she will sever the thread of life. And by doing so she is a Goddess. As a Mother, that is, she regains her divine character, creative, creating; and if there is violence in the act, it is because violence is innate in every act that inaugurates a beginning or decrees an end.

This is what Medea communicates through her action. In Pasolini's film it is absolutely not desperation, nor yet anger that drives Medea to commit the deed. Neither spouse betrayed, nor mother turned murderess for vengeance as a wife, Medea approaches her act objectively, impartially, like someone administering justice. She does what is necessary. She invokes the sacred name of Dike: the need for a Measure to reduce the ruthless pride of those who do not recognise love as a religion. Cruelty, intransigence, are the reverse side of love. This is the side, not particularly archaic, but absolute, universal, that Pasolini illuminates in Medea; not a soul tormented and distraught, but the lover who loves and judges and gives and takes and loves and punishes, and the mother who loves and sacrifices. As at the beginning she killed her brother, now at the end Medea kills her children. It is a sacrifice she makes, in the dual sense of rite and sacrifice. With his children's death the continuity of the line of descent that Jason wants is broken: the prosperity of the house, as men understand it. It utterly breaks the power of the male, it leaves him impotent, deprived of offspring and wife, without a future. For love of him Medea had abandoned her world, she had betrayed it. Now she redeems betrayal through her crime which, by damaging the power of generation in the male, eliminates the fruit of the cross-breed to which she had stooped.

But in the act she loses part of herself. She sacrifices her own fruit. By doing so she shows that passions cause suffering. They cannot simply be enjoyed. Or rather, the enjoyment also bears deathly fruit. Allowing passion means entering a universe where Eros embraces Ananke. Suffering for the act that she herself perpetrates, Medea brings to the scene not only her wrath, but uncontrollable fury, demonic passion, the justice of Dike, the law of Themis. Already in Euripides the tearful hysterics of the woman Medea, who wept for love and raved against injustice, were resolved in a final apotheosis. Here then is the face of Medea: Medea is *Theos* – reintegrated in her divine prerogative, in contact with the Sun and with Fire, tremendous,

in the end she rises above Jason, and escapes him. Jason is defeated. And in a kind of transfiguration the scandalous mother regains divine distance, sovereign authority, which will also impose a commemorative cult on the city. Medea wins, Medea, I repeat, is *Theos* – she is more than a woman, she is a god. The pages Bernard Knox devotes to Medea in *The Heroic Temper* are wonderful (1964: 5ff.). Not only is Medea presented to us as a hero – in the manner of the heroes of Sophocles – but she appears to us at the end precisely as a *Theos*.

This is her scandal. After having abased herself in contact with the male, after having emptied herself by creating, she now withdraws her fruit, turns back on herself and wraps herself in her solitude. And decrees the end, the end of the entire world. By eliminating her children, the mother withdraws the very possibility of the world. Her children dead, the world of man ends, the human world, the created world exists in so far as it is the world of children. Where a mother dominates, there are only children, but if the mother withdraws that to which she has given birth, what world can exist? This is the nightmare shown through Medea.

Medea 4

Echoes of the mythical Medea reappear in Shakespeare. Like any other Elizabethan schoolboy, Shakespeare learned the ethical paradox running: “Video meliora proboque, deteriora sequor”, i.e. I see good and approve, but follow evil. Thus, Medea reflects perplexed in one of Shakespeare’s favourite books, the *Metamorphoses*, Book 7, ll. 20-1. This passage in particular is constantly transmitted in Elizabethan culture and misrepresented – for example by the Calvinists, as also by Anglicans and Puritans. The theme is heard from every pulpit, used to comment on Paul’s Epistle to the Romans (7:5), an absolutely basic text for Calvin and his English followers. The theme is free will, an obsessive theme, a dominant worry in the thought of English Protestants.

Other than Ovid, in creating the courageous, audacious Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare uses the 1566 translation of Seneca’s *Medea* by John Studley, a translation included in Thomas Newton’s 1581 collection of *Ten Tragedies* by Seneca. Of course, Shakespeare may have read Seneca in the original, he knew Latin. But the echoes of Studley’s English version ring particularly clearly in *Macbeth*. A good example is “pelle femineos metus” (43), which in Studley’s English becomes “Exile all foolysh female feare, and pity from thy mynde” (120v.) – lines Shakespeare uses wholesale in his construction of her character.⁵

⁵ About this complex net of references, see the pages on *Macbeth* in Fusini 2010:

Now, in the chronicles (particularly Holinshed) used by Shakespeare to source the plot for his play, the figure of Lady Macbeth is drawn on the model of an ambitious wife who forces and perverts her wavering husband to committing regicide. It is she who is audacious – she who incarnates the audacity of the crime. Those terms essential to the tragic lexicon of Euripides in the first place (*tolma, thrasos*) and then of Seneca (*ira, furor*), – terms essential to the hero protagonist of the criminal action in both Euripides and Seneca, here too in Shakespeare are reserved for the woman-hero: ‘woman-hero’, not heroine – because the term ‘heroine’ betrays the very concept of ‘heroic’.

In Shakespeare’s play, of the two protagonists she, the lady, is the first to yield to the metamorphosis leading whoever undergoes it to the commission of the crime: she, daring above all others. It is the lady, who in a solo both wonderful and tremendous explicitly recites her mantra to the spirits of evil, even invoking sexual metamorphosis which, by unsexing her in a sort of sublimation in reverse, a trans-descent, abolishes the common, generic, general, universal man-woman distinction, throwing it into a sort of monstrous, demoniacal degeneration. Or divine?

This is the sense of the famous monologue in 1.5, “Unsex me here” (41),⁶ when Lady Macbeth invokes the evil spirits to perform a transgender operation, to change her sex, and they recognise her true nature, which is fulfilled in the deed. Woman no longer, in the commission of her transgressive act she is the hero, female masculinity is the power to which she gives herself as the means.

Similarly, in the opening scene of Seneca’s play, Medea invokes Hecate, the goddess of night, of Hell, she calls upon the chaos of eternal night, the spirits of evil, the Furies, Pluto, Proserpine – to help her achieve revenge against Jason. She thinks first of seeking revenge against his new wife: “Est coniunx”, she thought. “In hanc ferrum exigatur” – but will it be enough? “Hoc meis satis est malis?” (125-6). She thinks not. Here then is the woman-hero ready to look into her own bowels for ‘the way to revenge’, the greatest revenge.

Ready for the impossible, through her children Medea offers the fatal, poisoned gift to Jason’s wife, but like a frenzied maenad, given up entirely to her rage, she abandons herself to a mad, violent, savage love of evil (“amore saevo”, 850). She says it herself: her identity matures in evil, in crime. “Medea nunc sum; crevit ingenium malis” – Now I am Medea, she says: she becomes Medea when she gives herself up to crime. It is through murder, the criminal act, that she is fulfilled.

357-450, esp. 384-6.

⁶ All quotations from *Macbeth* refer to Muir 1984.

It might be said that every act is in its way a step towards the act, and every step towards the act a transport of Es towards Ego. Or, more philosophically, it is a transit from power to act. The identity of the Ego is produced in the act – this is the *punctum*, the flash of intelligence of the heroic psyche, which shines in the new incarnation of Medea in Lady Macbeth. Precisely: *Lady Macbeth nunc sum; crevit ingenium malis*. The profound sense of these words is already clear to us.

In Studley's translation, taken up by Shakespeare, Medea's discourse is enriched with touches that out-Seneca Seneca: Studley invents and Shakespeare follows suit, for example, when Medea dips her already gory hands more deeply in blood; this is not in Seneca. Studley sees Medea, or suggests to Medea "In bloud to bath thy bloody handes and traytrous lyues to wast" (120v.) – an action Lady Macbeth repeats. And if in Seneca's Medea we witness the maenad's action as she sinks the dagger in her breast, her own naked flesh, to make the blood flow and lave the altar on which she is soon to sacrifice her children; in order that her hand may learn to grasp the sword with which she is about to kill her children, shedding their blood, Studley and Shakespeare dwell on images of 'flesh flogged and beaten'; crushed, which reappear in the paroxysm of violence in Shakespeare's maenad, who is Lady Macbeth.

In terms of the plot and emotions underpinning *Macbeth* and *Medea*, the two plays could not be more different. But in a certain sense they also form a knot, the noose they both tighten round an idea of Eros obsessed with power, and their plot in which character and soul are exchanged. With a difference: the Medeas of Euripides and Seneca are mother and wife, each of whom kills her husband, the father of her children, for 'just' revenge. The Shakespearean lady does not really perform at all: she witnesses, though not passively - witnesses as an assistant at a birth, she is the midwife. She even becomes mother to her man Macbeth. She loves thus, it is she who gives birth to the man she wants and desires. It is not she who kills Duncan. She would be unable to, she confesses: he's too like my father, she says – a touch of extraordinarily sensitive intelligence in Shakespeare - she does not sacrifice the children she has not got, or at any rate who do not appear on stage. But she would do so, just as Seneca's Medea is ready to "scour her entrails". She is ready to pluck her new born babe from her breast and dash his brains out. She is an out and out mother and murderer. And above all she is a 'heroic woman', who believes in the act. And she manages to have her man commit the deed. She persuades, convinces, quells Macbeth's perplexity, she orients him. She, a woman of daring, makes of her man a hatchet man. She employs him as a hitman. Go, kill, return, drop the knives.

It is Lady Macbeth who re-motivates Macbeth's flagging desire – waver-

ing, uncertain, perplexed; she who maintains vigour, a turgid desire which at a certain point collapses, because men are like that, as is explained by the porter of the castle where the two Macbeths live; the tumescence of Eros invades, upsets and transforms the male body: the member swells, but then it also deflates. Erection and deflation, tumescence and de-tumescence, this is the rhythm of the male man's libido. This is the rhythm of male desire. How can Lady Macbeth – as woman-hero – ever love her man except by making herself the lynchpin of this rhythm, tuning herself to it, in support? As an erectile caryatid?

Medea 1, 2, 3, 4

Medea did what she did for Jason, she supported him in the struggle, wanted, desired with him, when he desired the Golden Fleece. Medea loved like that: she loved her desire for him, she loved desire 'for the other'. In the same way Lady Macbeth supports her man when he wavers. Only she cannot manage it, not entirely: she cannot, she does not know, she is unable – what is the right formulation? Perhaps she cannot because it is a strength possessed by no-one "of woman born" (4.1.79). Perhaps it is something that can only be named in impersonal terms, which is to say: there is no-one able to support the desire. This is the crushing disappointment that Lady Macbeth in particular has to bear.

In fact, in this new guise, our Lady Macbeth is a totally modern woman. Or, at any rate, hers is an early modern *eros*. She is already suffering the unease of this civilisation. It is no chance that Shakespeare brings a doctor on stage with his useless drugs. Lady Macbeth falls ill and no-one can cure her.

I am not a literary historian, I do not read literature for confirmation or lack of it in certain passages of history; I am a scholar of literature and comparative studies and I note and note down the recurrence of certain figures in our literary tradition and in our culture and in our imagination. And I note that there is never really true repetition. Always in their reappearance there are noticeable differences which do indeed indicate clearly, if we are able to read, how material history, the material conditions of life in history, count, and transform thought and imagination.

I add that I firmly believe in the interlace of material life with thought, of reality with imagination, a tight interlace of complex knots which if properly perceived and well illumined yield deep awareness of our historical existence. And yes, of course, in the Medea of Euripides as in that of Seneca, contemporary reality is reflected in each, and yes, of course, how can one not perceive in the *Medea* of Euripides the intellectual ferment in

Athens at the end of the 5th century? So it is indeed a fact that precisely the role of women in society and in the family is in question – and the same is true of Seneca.

And yes, of course, these texts speak of men and women who live in their own times, the texts reflect those times. But certainly the greatest – and I call to mind Euripides, Seneca, Shakespeare, do not merely reflect; they use, dramatize, work with the thoughts and feelings of their times. For in 5th-century Athens these are not the same as in Seneca's Rome, or Shakespeare's London – not that I would swear to the magnificent progressive destinies of the change.

I would say, rather, that if in all three cases the subordination of women certainly existed, in spite of the obvious fact that women of talent are now, were then, successful in numerous fields, this subordination, which – surprise! – still exists today, could both then and now be read as an impasse pushing us into a blind alley which is a Gordian knot binding love and hate together. Between man and woman. This is why Medea is still contemporary.

Even though we modern women are no longer Medea, alas, we speak too much of rights, I am afraid. In order to become individuals both rational and aware, capable of self-determination, responsible for ourselves and the future of our families, of which our modern reality speaks to us, have we perhaps really had to become 'true' men? "Unsex me here"? Has Lady Macbeth's demand of the evil spirits been granted by the spirit of the time? Is this what has happened to us modern women? Have we changed sex?

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