
Medea: The Magical Woman Since Antiquity

By Edmund Cueva

There is no doubt that the mythological character of Medea has had a wide-ranging, interesting, and frightening legacy. If one were to think about the mythological story, one would perhaps vaguely recall that Medea was responsible for Jason's success in securing the Golden Fleece. More familiar - and more terrifying - would possibly be the parts of her story that relate Medea's killing of her two children, murderous vengeance on Jason's new bride and father-in-law, and banishment of Jason to a future without heirs, future wife, or a real home. This acquaintance with the myth or nebulous resonance of some components of the story probably arises from Euripides' play, *Medea* (431 BC).

However, other ancient texts and artwork also shape our modern interpretations, refashionings, and opinions about this magical woman - especially in the art of film, which is the source of the majority of the current opinions about Medea.[\[1\]](#) In addition to Euripides' *Medea*, we also have Hesiod's *Theogony*, Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautica*, and Seneca's *Medea* as the main primary literary sources about the Colchian priestess and princess - a foreigner that in the eyes of most Greeks, Jason and her adult victims among them, is a fearsome witch. There is also an abundance of art (vases and other types of paintings) that communicate the more gruesome parts of Medea's life. This article briefly explores the literary and artistic representations in order to show their influence - or lack thereof - on films that use or allude to the myth of Medea. Secondly, this article charts the ways in which some of the films reflect the times in which they were made.

Timothy Gantz in his *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* lists Hesiod (*Theogony* 992-1002) as the first author to mention Medea, who is the daughter of Aeëtes and whom Jason marries and takes to Iolcus. She bears him a son named Medeus.[\[2\]](#) The text reads:

When Aeson's son had / completed these he came to Iolcus, after enduring much toil, upon / a swift ship, leading Aeetes' quick-eyed daughter, and he made her / his vigorous wife. After she had been overpowered by Jason, the / shepherd of the people, she gave birth to a son, Medeus...[\[3\]](#)

Not much can be gleaned about the nature of Medea.

Post-Hesiodic brief, fragmented, or incomplete references to Medea exist

in the Greek elegiac poet Mimnermus, Pherecydes of Syros, and Sophocles' lost play *Kolchides* among many other literary and artistic references.[4] Pindar (*Pythian* 4.211-9) attributes the love of Medea for Jason to Aphrodite, who teaches the hero spells and incantations that he then uses to bewitch Medea into turning herself against her father and homeland, and to showing Jason how to get the Golden Fleece. Glimpses into the character of Medea appear in the *Kolchides*, in which scholars speculate Medea killed her brother Apsyrtus. We also read of this fratricide in the literary work that probably has had the greatest *Nachleben*, Euripides' *Medea*, where we hear Jason say:

A great curse / you were even then, betrayer of your father and of the land that / nourished you. But the gods have visited on me the avenging spirit / meant for you. For you killed your / own brother at the hearth and then stepped aboard the fair-prowed Argo. It was with acts like these that you began. (1334-6)[5]

Pherecydes includes in his work the shocking detail that Apsyrtus is a small child and Apollodorus in his *Library* gives a gruesome account of the death of Medea's brother:

When Aeetes discovered the daring deeds done by Medea, he started off in pursuit of the ship; but when she saw him near, Medea murdered her brother and cutting him limb from limb threw the pieces into the deep. Gathering the child's limbs, Aeetes fell behind in the pursuit; wherefore he turned back, and, having buried the rescued limbs of his child, he called the place Tomi.[6]

It seems that Medea had a reputation for killing small children even before she committed that act of killing her own children. This act labelled her as a terrible being, whom one would not cross without suffering dire consequences.[7] From accounts such as these come the "accepted" characterisation of Medea as a child-destroyer and the modern, filmic representations of Medea.

This view of Medea has a deep and far-ranging influence. For example, Nina Billone has written on the work of Rhodessa Jones and Sean Reynolds, who have directed since 2009 the "Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women." The goal of the project is to guide the:

Incarcerated and formerly incarcerated women to turn stories on their heads, and in so doing to place themselves at the centre of cultural and political narratives... By staging mythical journeys through multiple underworlds, the group works to transform such concepts as death, descent, violence, and loss into life, love, power, and hope. The company's work is founded on the belief that when women tell their

stories on the public stage, they are empowered to change - even to save - their lives.[8]

This noble initiative - that is meant to rehabilitate and restore lives broken by crime - turns the “ideology of the prison on its head” and also reinterprets Medea as a source of a possible change to a better life. This is something that was denied to Medea by her own actions, which she may or may not have been forced to perform.

However, the villainous portrayal of Medea bestowed upon her by the ancient Greeks and Romans still dominates any delineation of her persona. Indeed, Ronald Hutton has noted that along with Circe - who happens to be her aunt - Medea is universally seen as a powerful woman that works destructive magic but that is not “unequivocally evil.” Although she murders her brother and her own children, she commits the former act because she wanted to help her beloved Jason and the latter deed “in an orgy of vengeance” when Jason casts her off. She escapes retribution for both deeds and, consequently, the “attitudes of the [ancient] Greek texts towards her remain ambivalent.”[9] The Romans, however, manipulate and alter the “Greek” Medea into a nastier character and depict her as the type of witch that performs unspeakable evil and conjures wicked things in “elaborate nocturnal rites.”[10] This is not something readily found in the works of the ancient Greek authors mentioned above (e.g., Euripides, Hesiod, Apollonius of Rhodes, Mimnermus, Pherecydes of Syros, Sophocles, Pindar).

The evil, child-destroying, vengeful dimension of Medea often appears in modern news accounts that have women killing their children. For example, a 2018 news article reports that a woman “was charged in the death of her baby after he overdosed from a lethal mix of methadone, amphetamine and methamphetamine in her breast milk.” The news reporter then writes that at “least in this case, this Medea is going to be held responsible for killing her child.”[11] Likewise, in a 2016 news item, one reads the following about the death of a two-year-old boy at the hands of his two mothers: “One of the earliest and most famous is probably the Greek myth of Medea, wife of Jason (of the Argonauts fame) who, in an act of revenge following Jason’s affair with another princess, killed their two young sons. In contemporary diagnostic terms, this is known as ‘revenge filicide.’”[12] One last item of the many that exist: *The Plain Dealer*, in commenting on the acquittal of Casey Anthony in the murder of her two-year-old daughter Caylee Marie characterizes the mother as “an attractive, white mother from the suburbs who acted more like Medea than the Madonna.”[13] The “Medea” link between the mythological stories and narratives and the disturbingly sad news account of horrific real-life crimes cannot seem to be broken. However, this single facet - as alarming as it is - does not account for the totality of

this “magical” woman.

Medea in the Greek mind is not human but a grandchild of the god Helios and daughter of King Aeëtes and his nymph-wife Eidyia: Hesiod in his *Theogony* (956-7) writes that Aeëtes and his sister Circe were born to Helios by the ocean nymph Pereis and that Eidyia is the child of the ‘god Ocean’. Additionally, Medea is a witch, a female practitioner of magic, who could not only turn old men young but also cunningly dispatch her enemies. An example of the former occurs when Medea rejuvenates Jason’s aged father Aeson and kills Pelias, the man that had sent him on the expedition to get the Golden Fleece. The Roman poet Ovid includes these events in his *Metamorphoses*: after intricate and lengthy preparations that involve brewing a regenerative potion, Medea:

unsheathed her / knife and cut the old man’s throat; then, letting the old blood all / run out, she filled his veins with her brew. When Aeson had drunk / this in part through his lips and part through the wound, his beard / and hair lost their hoary grey and quickly became black again; his / leanness vanished, away went the pallor and the look of neglect, the / deep wrinkles were filled out with new flesh, his limbs had the / strength of youth. Aeson was filled with wonder, and remembered / that this was he forty years ago. (*Metamorphoses* 7.285-93)[14]

Things did turn out so well for Pelias; Medea encouraged Pelias’ own daughters to kill him:

Medea / said. “Come, draw your swords, and let out his old blood that I may / refill his empty veins with young blood again. In your own hands / rests your father’s life and youth. If you have any filial love, and if / the hopes are not vain that you are cherishing, come, do your duty / by your father; drive out age at your weapon’s point; let out his / enfeebled blood with the stroke of the steel.” Spurred on by these / words, as each was filial she became first in the unfilial act, and that / she might not be wicked did the wicked deed. Nevertheless, none / could bear to see her own blows; they turned their eyes away; and / so with averted faces they blindly struck with cruel hands. The old / man, streaming with blood, still raised himself on his elbow and half / mangled tried to get up from his bed; and with all those swords / round him, he stretched out his pale arms and cried: “What are you / doing, my daughters? What arms you to your father’s death?” Their / courage left them, their hands fell. When he would have spoken / further, the Colchian cut his throat and plunged his mangled body / into the boiling water. (*Metamorphoses* 7.332-49)

The literary consensus on the image of Medea – though somewhat ambivalent and unclear in some authors – is therefore a negative one, and it has generally remained so throughout time. What does appear in the

texts is a woman that is not human, but a deadly witch, a passionate lover that will betray kin and homeland for her beloved. The ancient texts describe her as a vengeful practitioner of dark arts, and a murderer of children. An additional aspect of her character that has not been mentioned is that she is considered a foreigner, a barbarian by the Greeks.

Although the wife of Jason, a Greek, she is originally from what is considered a wild, untamed, and savage part of the world. Her homeland, Colchis, is located at the extreme end of the known world, at the furthest point of the Black Sea. Evidently, in the Greek mind, nothing good can come from such a fierce place where monsters, such as a dragon, protect the Golden Fleece. This was the dragon that Medea helped Jason put to sleep and then vanquish in order that her beloved Jason could reach his goal. This is the literary portrayal, but what does ancient art tell us about Medea?

Ovid's account, included above, tells the reader that aged Pelias died at the hands of his own daughters - Medea had tricked them and Pelias into doing so. She had shown the daughters that she had such amazing powers that she could restore to youth any ancient being; she had done so with both Jason and his father Aeson. However, in this case, she successfully rejuvenated an old goat as proof, which Medea had killed, dismembered, and boiled in a cauldron of rejuvenation with the spectacular result of a youthful transformation. Unfortunately, the outcome for Pelias was not the same, he just ended up dead at the hands of his daughters. Perhaps this could be interpreted as a reverse-foreshadowing of what Medea would do to her own children: filicide instead of patricide, but filicide that metaphorically kills the father. Jason, after all, had no future, no children, and no woman would want to marry Jason for fear of what may happen to her and any children that she might have with Jason.

The earliest work of art that depicts a scene from the Medea-narrative is an Etruscan olpe vase that dates to around 630 BC.



Etruscan Olpe Vase, c. 630 BC.

Daniel Ogden describes the vase as having Medea on it: “labelled with an Etruscan variant of her name, ‘Metaia’, wielding a spoon or a wand, boils up Jason in her cauldron to rejuvenate him as the Argonauts, misunderstanding the situation, come running to help....”[\[15\]](#) Later depictions of the myth involve more scenes of rejuvenation, as Emma Griffiths notes, and these depictions emphasize “Medea’s powers which the literary sources can tend to elide.”[\[16\]](#) The iconographic components tend to include, for a large number of images, some or all of the following: Medea, Jason, a goat or ram (which was used in the deception to murder Pelias), a cauldron, an elderly man, a dragon (either the creature guarding the fleece or the one that pulled Medea’s chariot that she used to fly away from the scene of her Corinthian slaughter), and the Golden Fleece. Griffiths uses as an illustrative example an Attic red-figure hydria that dates to around 430 BC; the scene includes a woman (presumably Medea), an old man that has the name “Jason” inscribed next to him, and between them a ram in a tripod-cauldron that is

suspended over a fire.



Attic Red-figure Hydria, c. 430 BC.

The scene, Griffiths writes, is “not a scene we have in early literary sources, and this difference of emphasis already alerts us to one of the discrepancies we may encounter when accessing mythology via written and visual sources.”[\[17\]](#) However, later artwork with Medea-motifs can be more often associated with Euripides’ influential play relating the story of the Colchian wife of Jason. Indeed, after the play was produced in 431 BC, the appearance of the iconographic Medea becomes more oriental in nature and tend to show the death of her children and the dragon chariot.[\[18\]](#)

This generic/standard iconographic representation of the Medea story appears, for example, on a vase that Griffiths discusses in her monograph:[\[19\]](#) a Lucanian red-figure bell krater that dates to around 400 BC and is attributed to the Policoro Painter (Leonard C. Hanna, Jr. Fund 1991.1; The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH).



Lucanian Calyx-Krater c. 400 BC.

The vase includes a synoptic departure-scene of Medea on a chariot pulled by two dragons. The krater has the dead children on an altar in the lower register of the vase; an elderly nurse looks down on the dead children and pulls at her hair in grief and anguish. To the left of the altar, the painter has Jason approaching his children while he looks at the central image of the vase, which has Medea surrounded by an over-sized, awe-inspiring aureole as she speeds away from the scene of her crime. This synoptic image, this essay contends, is the indelible image that has most influenced art (of any type) in the post-classical era.

Before moving to the filmic Medea it is necessary to review very briefly Medea's *Nachleben* in the medieval period and the Renaissance. Ruth

Morse[20] has demonstrated that Ovid, and his immensely influential *Metamorphoses* and *Heroides*, moulded the medieval perception of Medea. Other authors like Seneca also exert some influence in her depiction but notwithstanding any attempts to rehabilitate her mythological story “the history of female seduction (with all its terrors and destructiveness) is grounded in blameworthy events. In medieval texts Medea, however pitiably seduced and abandoned, is the author of her own fall.”[21] Indeed, Katherine Heavey observes that “Medea is frequently identified as one of classical literature’s most abhorrent and uncontrolled heroines, by authors and commentators from the Middle Ages to the present day.”[22] More importantly for the modern perception of Medea, Heavey makes it quite clear that for the early modern literary Medea one finds that authors could choose to emphasize the ruinous monster that committed unspeakable acts and then received an appropriate punishment or elicit compassion for her by suggesting that she suffered from and acted out of love. However, Heavey does caution that simultaneously “and paradoxically... there is a sense that early modern authors felt themselves perversely constrained by Medea: although undeniably fascinated by her power, they cannot and do not celebrate it as their classical forebears do.”[23] As we shall see in films that treat this myth, this contrast is abundantly manifest in the conundrum that the directors face: although the story of Medea is quite moving and her plight actions are terrible and intolerable, one cannot overlook the murder of the children.

How do the classical, medieval, and Renaissance literary and artistic evidence and interpretations about Medea influence the modern, filmic view of the Colchian princess? How does a director tell the story of such a powerful “magical woman” - one that is generally viewed “as the epitome of the monstrous-feminine...the destroyer of her children”?[24] How can film capture that Medea that is a witch, who is beautiful, “sexually dangerous,” has knowledge of “potions, herbs, spells, and charms,” and is both a creator of and threat to children?[25] Due to space limitations, it is impossible to answer fully these questions or give a thorough analysis of all films that have Medea or Medea’s story as subjects.

Pier Paolo Pasolini’s 1969 *Medea* is a puzzling, yet straightforward film.[26] On the surface, it appears to be a simple retelling of the myth with all of the adjustments to the story heavily reflecting the director’s style and creativity. Indeed, as Jon Solomon notes, Pasolini’s work belongs to those non-Hollywood films that dealt with ancient themes and were made by European (especially Italian directors) as a consequence of the scandals and cost overruns that frequented American films like Joseph Mankiewicz’s 1963 *Cleopatra*. This new wave of ancient films had “non epic” atmospheres and “fresh artistic perspectives” as created in Pasolini’s *Medea* and the 1969 *Fellini Satyricon*; Solomon describes the

former work as “creating a metahistorical, anthropological environment for Medea’s revenge on Jason and Creon.”[27] This transformation is symptomatic of the social and political changes in context: “She, a stranger, is believed to be such by the society in which she migrates and into which she cannot integrate; Medea becomes a symbol of rejection and marginalisation, and magic a *topos* of discrimination – again a magic which is a powerful symbol of danger and alterity.”[28] Pasolini downplays the filicide.

More importantly – or better said, more imposingly – Maria Callas is the lead. The opera star’s lines are not as many as those of the Medeas that we see in the other three films discussed in this essay. However, what is constant and immensely compelling is the gaze of Medea, which is more Callas than “Medea” or at least what anyone familiar with the ancient texts and images would have imaged. It is the female gaze, Colleen Marie Ryan argues – an opinion that I agree with – that serves as “the” important key with which to decipher what Pasolini’s film is all about and to appreciate his transformation of the magical-mythical character.[29] Ryan states that the director empowered the female gaze and thus defined femininity and used “it as a vehicle through which to ascertain and examine his own male identity.”[30] Pasolini used Medea and her filmic character’s desire to return to her original “private and spiritual being” as his own frustration surrounding the “socio-political events around 1969.”[31] This is a break from the Euripidean Medea who had no real power in the male-sphere in which Jason lived. After all, she was a foreigner, a witch, a woman in a Greek male-dominated society. She had no real recourse or refuge except to use her “magical” or “wise-woman” ways by interpreting correctly the oracle that Aegeus had received regarding his own fecundity.[32]

Jules Dassin’s 1978 *A Dream of Passion* revisits the myth with another stellar lead, Melina Mercouri, who plays an actress called Maya that is rehearsing for a performance of the Euripidean tragedy. Dassin, a director that had been exiled from Hollywood during the McCarthy era, juxtaposes the stage actress Mercouri with Brenda Collins, a woman that had been sentenced to prison for murdering her three children. The murderess, who is played by Ellen Burstyn, is like Medea since she was about to lose her husband to a foreign woman in a foreign land. Aside from the fanatical religious dimension of Brenda’s personality, which sort of fits with the magical or ritualistic that is often attached to the mythological Medea, Dassin presents the viewer with a striking analytical insight as to why Brenda killed her children. Not only was she to be made a husbandless, childless, destitute exile in a country not her own, she had also been the victim of violence at the hands of her husband, for whom she had a love that bordered on some sort of sexual psychopathy that may have originated in a repressed, religion-centred personality disorder. In

an interview with Dassin, Dan Georgakas and Petros Anastasopoulos relate that the director said that:

The romantic treatment of women in screen roles is dead or dying. That doesn't mean romance is dead or dying. But you have to deal with a new kind of woman, thank God, a woman who is not exclusively and only to be treated in a romantic way. Women have things to say, women have a fight, women are beginning to occupy important social positions.[\[33\]](#)

This is followed later by this intriguing statement:

Brenda is an international character. I think she is that woman, of which there are legions everywhere, whose world is so small, whose horizons are so shrunken, that they have constructed an entire life around one single human being. She is a woman who has not had the time or information to structure other interests. And when what she has built is shaken, she is in deep trouble. I think that woman, unfortunately, exists everywhere.[\[34\]](#)

Dassin's opinions cast Brenda as being more similar to Medea than the Medea that Maya is preparing for on the stage. In fact, there is no doubt that the way in which Dassin staged the moments leading to the death of Brenda's three children is much more moving and poignant than what Euripides himself wrote. There is no getting away from the fact that the combination of the three Medeas (the mythical, the actress, the murderess) completely characterises an extremely tortured woman that commits an extremely evil act - the motivation for Brenda's acts and the person of Brenda herself appear inconsequential in view of the destruction of the children. Patricia Salzman-Mitchell and Jean Alvares write that of the three Medea films (Pasolini 1969, Dassin 1978, and von Trier 1988) that came before Arturo Ripstein's 2000 *Así es la vida*, Dassin's film "is probably the one most 'modern' and 'reflexive' of the three, and probably the easiest to follow in some ways."[\[35\]](#) It should also be described as the most "shocking" perhaps because there is no actual way to rescue Brenda from condemnation except if some sort of psychological aberration is blamed for her actions. After all, it is noted in the film that she ate cake while she wrote the letter to her husband in which she shared the details of her crime.

Lars von Trier's 1988 film is unlike Pasolini or Dassin in its depiction of Medea. The viewer is exposed to a surreal watery world from which Medea arises just like a mythological sea nymph. The places, people, and things in which she finds herself or is surrounded by - both in the present, past, and future - are associated with the sea. This, of course, is a logical correlation to the myth since Jason was a seafarer and known for his ship Argo and his sailing companions the Argonauts. Medea, after all,

had sailed as a fugitive away from her father's fleet and in some versions of the myth, Medea had dismembered her brother Apsyrtus and then tossed the pieces of the corpse into the sea. This was done to slow down the pursuing fleet, which stopped to collect all of the parts of the body so as to give a proper funeral. The only "dry" circumstances materialise when Medea hangs her sons on the dead tree in a field flush with life. A truly horrific set of minutes when one son helps hang the other and then urges Medea to hang him. All the while, Jason is lost amid a thick copse of trees trying to locate Medea and their sons.

Medea's plight and her ensuing actions in this film do not appear to originate fully in Euripides' play, which offers some sympathy for Medea. However, it was Euripides that introduced Medea as a killer of her own children because other versions had the citizens of Corinth murder them after Medea had killed their king and young princess. It may be argued that filmic versions discussed thus far may rely more on the Senecan play, which, as Hanna Roisman suggests:

Does not allow the audience to identify with Medea" and that from the very beginning Seneca presents Medea "as being different as possible from the good people of the audience, as 'not us'. The audience was invited to observe her from a distance, as a barbaric foreigner and supernatural witch, with whom they had nothing in common.[\[36\]](#)

Indeed, without a doubt, von Trier offers a Medea that elicits revulsion and horror, but he also, as Helene Foley observes, makes her a sympathetic character:

Largely by reducing her almost to silence. In this version, Medea's eldest son lovingly helps his appallingly ill-treated mother to hang her child. Hence, as Medea, finally ensconced on Aegeus' boat, takes off the disfiguring cap that she has worn throughout the film to liberate a cascade of long red hair, the audience is, I think, urged to feel a thrill of sympathy.[\[37\]](#)

From the very start of the film, Medea is shown with non-human characteristics: sea-borne, shrouded in mists that steam up from the sea and boggy lands, a mysterious witch collecting plants and berries. The story also emphasises Aegeus, his dilemma, and sex more at the outset of the story - he cannot have male children, which is paralleled at the end with the destruction of Jason's male children and any future sexual partner and resultant male offspring. This film, in truth, plays up the role of sex more than in the classical texts. For instance, in this modern example, we have Glauce refusing sex with Jason until he does something about Medea; toward the end of the film Jason refuses to have sex with Medea and he then strikes her. This physical violence against women

seems to be gain a greater hold in later films on this myth and lends to the creation of a greater understanding of the character and her actions, but it does not excuse them.

This essay concludes with Arturo Ripstein's 2000 *Así es la vida*, which clearly announces at the end of the film that it was based on Seneca's *Medea* which, as noted above, presented an extremely pejorative view of the magical Medea. In fact, from the very start of the film, the magical, mysterious, witchcraft practicing aspects of the main character Julia are emphasised and then repeated throughout the entire film. The film opens with the camera focused on the back of a moving truck that has a metallic hatch that shimmers in the light as if it were made of gold - a clear reference to the legendary Golden Fleece - this truck and its glimmering gold are recurrently shown going through tunnels as if on a katabatic trek. Immediately thereafter, Julia appears and speaks about her abandonment by Nicolas (Ripstein's Jason) as she is surrounded by shocking juxtapositions of Christian iconography and *curandera* accoutrements in one room while in an adjoining room the viewer gets glimpses of medical equipment and furniture used in performing abortions. This Medea is unlike the others depicted in film before Ripstein's version.

The delineation of Julia's character is surprising: she uses obscenities frequently and imaginatively, relies upon and uses a man-hating *madrina* (godmother) for advice, smokes, and drinks. The *madrina* is a fascinating reworking of the Nurse character found in some of the classical texts, but here she initially seems to be used to mouth the anti-male feelings that Julia has: male children should never be allowed to be born; their necks should/could be snapped at birth like chicken bones; males are, for the most part, to be avoided. However, the *madrina* does suggest to Julia that she forget Nicolas, leave, and seek another man; there are always men who would be interested in bedding Julia. Even though she offers such advice, she is worried and shaken by the threats that Julia makes against her children. This hatred of the male is also evident in the Creon character as found in the person of *Marrana*, which translates as pig or sow, but can also mean "slut" when applied to women. Evidently, what is intended is that Nicolas' future father-in-law have within him all the male qualities that Julia and *madrina* despise; in other words, *Marrana* is a "sexist pig."

As in all of the texts and films mentioned in this essay, Julia/Medea eventually kills her children. However, Ripstein's clever innovations and additions do not take away from the customary view of Medea as an abandoned woman, a foreigner in a foreign, a witch, someone to be feared, and a murderer of her own children.[\[38\]](#) It seems that no matter the medium, time, interpreters, or changing social mores and attitudes,

Medea will always be summed up by her final actions toward her children even if Ripstein's murder sequence looks "far removed from that tranquility we saw in Pasolini's *Medea*." [39]

It appears that Medea will always be the horrific Medea. However, it must be remembered that all of the texts and artwork, ancient and modern, are the creation of men. It is men who craft the character of Medea and it is men that then set the model that is used when working with the myth.

Notes

[1] Indeed, after a presentation on what the ancient Greeks and Romans thought and wrote about Medea, this essay analyses four films that may help us understand how the modern auteur manipulates the myth or how the myth and all its literary and artistic baggage may influence the auteur. The films are *Medea* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italy, 1969), *A Dream of Passion* (Jules Dassin, Greece, 1978), *Medea* (Lars von Trier, Denmark, 1988), and *Así es la vida* (Arturo Ripstein, Mexico, 2000).

[2] Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 358.

[3] The translation is from Hesiod, *Theogony. Works and Days. Testimonia*, ed. and trans. Glenn W. Most, Loeb Classical Library 57 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 83.

[4] See Gantz, *Early Greek Myth*, 358-73 for a thorough enumeration and discussion of the artistic and literary references regarding Medea.

[5] The translation is from Euripides, *Cyclops. Alcestis. Medea*, ed. and trans. David Kovacs, Loeb Classical Library 12 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 403-5.

[6] The translation is from Apollodorus, *The Library, Volume I: Books 1-3.9*, trans. James G. Frazer, Loeb Classical Library 121 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921), 113.

[7] Apollonius of Rhodes has a different narrative on the death of Aspyrtus: he is a grown man that leads the Colchian fleet in pursuit of Medea and Jason after they have stolen the Golden Fleece.

[8] Nina Billone, "Performing Civil Death: The Medea Project and Theater for Incarcerated Women," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2009): 261.

[9] Ronald Hutton, *The Witch: A History of Fear, From Ancient Times to The Present* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 58. Hutton writes that both women “were to be immensely influential figures in later European literature, as ultimate ancestresses of many of its magic-wielding females...” (58).

[10] Hutton, *The Witch*, 63.

[11] Christine M. Flowers, “A Formula for Disaster: An Addicted Mom and a Breastfeeding Child,” *The Chronicle* (Willimantic, CT), July 25, 2018, 5.

[12] Val Burns, “Hearts of Darkness: Inside the Minds of the Women who killed Liam Fee,” *The Herald and the Sunday Herald* (Glasgow, Scotland), June 5, 2016.

[13] *The Plain Dealer*, “Cases Celebrated vs. Cases Ignored,” *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), July 8, 2011.

[14] The translated passages from Ovid are from Ovid, *Metamorphoses, Volume I: Books 1-8*, trans. Frank Justus Miller and rev. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 42 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916), 363.

[15] Daniel Ogden, *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 203 fn. 58. There exists an Etruscan mirror (Paris [France] Bibliothèque Nationale de France, département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques bronze. 1329) that dates to the end of the fourth century BC that may perhaps include a similar retelling of Jason’s restored youth. The rejuvenated figure has been identified both as Jason and Pelops. The latter was slaughtered, cooked, and then served by his own father Tantalus as a meal to the gods, who then reassembled almost all of the bits and pieces of Pelops except for the his shoulder, which had been eaten by a preoccupied Demeter. Of course, the other gods had not been duped by Tantalus and, therefore, did not partake in the cannibalistic meal.

[16] Emma Griffiths, *Medea* (London: Routledge, 2006), 23.

[17] Griffiths, *Medea*, 25.

[18] Griffiths, *Medea*, 25 also notes: “There are also images which give us views of stories which are not referred to in the written art at this period, as with the red-figure pots from around 450 BC which show Theseus and a woman, presumed to be Medea—this is not well-attested in the literary sources. Similarly the death of Talos at Medea’s hands receives its first

literary account in Apollonios' *Argonautica*, but is seen earlier in vases from the last quarter of the fifth century."

[19] Griffiths, *Medea*, 86ff.

[20] Ruth Morse, *The Medieval Medea* (Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer, 1996).

[21] Morse, *The Medieval Medea*, 126. Commenting on Morse's analysis of Medea, Amy Wygant (*Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France Stages and Histories, 1553-1797* [Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007], 33) writes that "Morse's point is that the story of Medea and Jason was for the Middle Ages a secular tale of history, not a myth, and because the medieval notion of the cycle of human ambition and the buffetings of fortune differed from antiquity's notion of the hero's fortunes and fall, this story was specifically not tragedy. What medieval writers wrote, Morse argues, was necessarily not tragedy, but rather sorrow, and this necessity arose from their understanding that, with the story of Medea, they were in the presence of secular chronology, not mythical time."

[22] Katherine Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558-1688* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 2.

[23] Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea*, 201.

[24] Serinity Young, *Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 46.

[25] Young, *Women Who Fly*, 155. See also Martin M. Winkler's "Medea's Infanticide: How to Present the Unimaginable" in his *Classical Literature on Screen: Affinities of Imagination*, 59-98. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

[26] The literature on this film is vast and the opinions regarding what Pasolini was attempting to do in his retelling of the myth are varied. For example, see among very many: Marianne McDonald's "Pasolini's *Medea*: The Lesson of the Grain" in her *Euripides in Cinema: The Heart Made Visible*, 3-50 (Philadelphia: Centrum, 1983); Ian Christie, "Between Magic and Realism: Medea on Film," in *Medea in Performance: 1500-2000*, eds. Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Oliver Taplin, 144-65 (Oxford: Legenda, 2000); Filippo Carlà, "Pasolini, Aristotle, Freud: Filmed Drama between Psychoanalysis and 'Neoclassicism,'" in *Hellas on Screen: Cinematic Receptions of Ancient History, Literature and Myth*, eds. Irene Berti and Marta García Morcillo, 89-115 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008).

[27] Jon Solomon, "The Sounds of Cinematic Antiquity," in *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, ed. Martin M. Winkler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 332. It has also been suggested that Corrado Alvaro's essay *La lunga notte di Medea* (1949) may have anticipated the transformation of Medea into the person that we see in Pasolini.

[28] Filippo Carlà and Irene Berti, *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 10. See also Jesús Carruesco and Montserrat Reig's "Medea, a Greek Sorceress in Modern Opera and Ballet: From Barber to Reimann" in Carlà and Berti; Carruesco and Reig write that "in the history of reception two main ways of interpreting Medea's magical knowledge can be distinguished: a psychological line, predominant in the twentieth century, which places the source of its destructive power in the interior of Medea's mind, and what we would call a political-sociological approach, in which the magic motif functions as an element of characterization of the stranger or the barbarian in conflict with so-called civilization" (93).

[29] Colleen Marie Ryan, "Salvaging the Sacred: Female Subjectivity in Pasolini's *Medea*," *Italica* 76, no. 2 (1999): 193-204.

[30] Ryan, "Salvaging the Sacred," 201.

[31] Ryan, "Salvaging the Sacred," 201.

[32] See Lada Stevanović ("Between Mythical and Rational Worlds: *Medea* by Pier Paolo Pasolini," in *Ancient Worlds in Film and Television: Gender and Politics*, eds. Almut-Barbara Renger and Jon Solomon [Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013], 219) on Medea's dislocated but potent sphere of power: "He recognizes the repression and unrecognized status of the domain/time to which Medea originally belongs, especially when it is merged into and swallowed by the dominant masculine one. However, Medea's rebellious reaction also belongs...to the domain of rational entrance into historical linearity, because it was her only option to be noticed and respected." However, Colin Dignam ("Cutting Narrative Ties: Sacrifice and Transformation in *Medea*," *At the Interface / Probing the Boundaries* 90 [September, 2017]: 83) does find a continuation of the Euripidean and Ovidian paradigms in Pasolini, especially in those scenes that echo the sacrificial-ritualistic components of Medea's acts that may point to a display of Medea's "individual autonomy even as she seeks to achieve acceptance within a community."

[33] Dan Georgakas and Petros Anastasopoulos, "'A Dream of Passion': An Interview with Jules Dassin," *Cinéaste* 9, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 21.

[34] Georgakas and Anastasopoulos, "'A Dream of Passion,'" 22.

[35] Patricia B. Salzman-Mitchell and Jean Alvares, *Classical Myth and Film in the New Millennium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 227.

[36] Hanna M. Roisman, "Medea's Vengeance," in *Looking at Medea: Essays and a Translation of Euripides' Tragedy*, ed. David Stuttard (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 121.

[37] Helene P. Foley, "Euripides and Tragic Theatre in the Late Fifth Century," *Illinois Classical Studies* 24/25 (1999-2000): 12.

[38] For example: the use of the television set and the "Anselmo Fuentes y sus hermanos" band as modern reinterpretations of the classical chorus; the reference to the *mal ojo* as an anchor for the Latin American setting of the plot; the continual allusions or use of rain and water and the mopping of floors as hints to the sea and its mythological connection to the Graeco-Roman Medea; and the classical proskynetic begging made by Julia to Nicolas and the *Marrana*.

[39] Winkler, "Medea's Infanticide," 65.

Bibliography

Apollodorus. *The Library, Volume I: Books 1-3.9*. Translated by James G. Frazer. Loeb Classical Library 121. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1921.

Billone, Nina. "Performing Civil Death: The Medea Project and Theater for Incarcerated Women." *Text & Performance Quarterly* 29, no. 3 (2009): 260-75.

Burns, Val. "Hearts of Darkness: Inside the Minds of the Women who Killed Liam Fee." *The Herald and the Sunday Herald* (Glasgow, Scotland), June 5, 2016.

Carlà, Filippo. "Pasolini, Aristotle, Freud: Filmed Drama between Psychoanalysis and 'Neoclassicism.'" In *Hellas on Screen: Cinematic Receptions of Ancient History, Literature and Myth*, edited by Irene Berti and Marta García Morcillo, 89-115. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2008.

Carlà, Filippo, and Irene Berti, eds. *Ancient Magic and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

Carruesco, Jesús, and Montserrat Reig. "Medea, a Greek Sorceress in Modern Opera and Ballet: From Barber to Reimann." In *Ancient Magic*

and the Supernatural in the Modern Visual and Performing Arts, edited by Filippo Carlà and Irene Berti, 93-102. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

Christie, Ian. "Between Magic and Realism: Medea on Film." In *Medea in Performance: 1500-2000*, edited by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Oliver Taplin, 144-65. Oxford: Legenda, 2000.

Dignam, Colin. "Cutting Narrative Ties: Sacrifice and Transformation in Medea." *At the Interface / Probing the Boundaries* 90 (September 2017): 83-94.

Euripides. *Cyclops. Alcestis. Medea*. Edited and translated by David Kovacs. Loeb Classical Library 12. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994.

Flowers, Christine M. "A Formula for Disaster: An Addicted Mom and a Breastfeeding Child." *The Chronicle* (Willimantic, CT), July 25, 2018.

Foley, Helene P. "Euripides and Tragic Theatre in the Late Fifth Century." *Illinois Classical Studies* 24/25 (1999-2000): 1-13.

Gantz, Timothy. *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

Georgakas, Dan, and Petros Anastasopoulos. "'A DREAM OF PASSION': An Interview with Jules Dassin." *Cinéaste* 9, no. 1 (Fall 1978): 20-24.

Griffiths, Emma. *Medea*. London: Routledge, 2006.

Heavey, Katherine. *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558-1688*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015.

Hesiod. *Theogony. Works and Days. Testimonia*. Edited and translated by Glenn W. Most. Loeb Classical Library 57. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018.

Hutton, Ronald. *The Witch: A History of Fear, From Ancient Times to the Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017.

McDonald, Marianne. *Euripides in Cinema: The Heart Made Visible*. Philadelphia: Centrum, 1983.

Morse, Ruth. *The Medieval Medea*. Cambridge, England: D. S. Brewer, 1996.

Ogden, Daniel. *Drakōn: Dragon Myth and Serpent Cult in the Greek and Roman Worlds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Ovid. *Metamorphoses, Volume I: Books 1-8*. Translated by Frank Justus Miller. Revised by G. P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 42. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1916.

Plain Dealer, The. "Cases Celebrated vs. Cases Ignored." *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland, OH), July 8, 2011.

Roisman, Hanna M. "Medea's Vengeance." In *Looking at Medea: Essays and a Translation of Euripides' Tragedy*, edited by David Stuttard, 111-22. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

Ryan, Colleen Marie. "Salvaging the Sacred: Female Subjectivity in Pasolini's *Medea*." *Italica* 76, no. 2 (1999): 193-204.

Salzman-Mitchell, Patricia B., and Jean Alvares. *Classical Myth and Film in the New Millennium*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Shipley, Lucy. 2016. "Stories in Clay: Mythological Characters on Ceramics in Archaic Etruria." *Etruscan Studies* 19 (2): 225-55.

Solomon, Jon. "The Sounds of Cinematic Antiquity." In *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema*, edited by Martin M. Winkler, 319-37. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Sterritt, David. "'The Future is Digital Cinema': An Interview with Arturo Ripstein and Paz Alicia Garciadiego," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 21, no. 1 (2003): 39-51.

Stevanović, Lada. "Between Mythical and Rational Worlds: *Medea* by Pier Paolo Pasolini." In *Ancient Worlds in Film and Television: Gender and Politics*, edited by Almut-Barbara Renger and Jon Solomon, 213-227. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013.

Young, Serinity. *Women Who Fly: Goddesses, Witches, Mystics, and Other Airborne Females*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Winkler, Martin M. *Classical Literature on Screen: Affinities of Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Wygant, Amy. *Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France Stages and Histories, 1553-1797*. Aldershot, England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007.

Filmography

Dassin, Jules, dir. *A Dream of Passion*. 1978.

Pasolini, Pier Paolo, dir. *Medea*. 1969.

Ripstein, Arturo, dir. *Así es la vida*. 2000.

Trier, Lars von, dir. *Medea*. 1988.

About the Author

Edmund Cueva is a tenured Professor of Classics and Humanities at the University of Houston-Downtown. He has possessed a commensurate record of accomplishment as a teacher-scholar, and has demonstrated a sustained and high level of excellence in teaching and scholarship. At Xavier University (Cincinnati, Ohio), where he won the Bishop Fenwick Teacher of the Year Award, and received the rank of full professor of Classics and then was hired at UHD as its first-ever external department chair. In addition to a demonstrated ability in teaching, Edmund has shown substantial dedication to scholarship. His research demonstrates an abiding habit of mind: 27 refereed articles in peer-reviewed, premier journals; over 60 book reviews in top-rated journals; 13 monograph, co-edited, or co-authored books. Additionally, he was the managing editor of the Classical Bulletin for ten years and since 2005 have been the executive editor of The Petronian Society Newsletter; since 2012 he has served as the book review editor for Interdisciplinary Humanities. Edmund's exemplary contribution to the advancement of the field is further evidenced by a record of continuous and consistent public speaking at professional conferences in prominent and prestigious venues at regional, national, and international levels.