



Section 1. Fiction works

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THE PERPETUAL LAMENTATION OF A RIGHTLESS WOMAN

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Abstract

The topic under study is the Berliner Ensemble interpretation of *Medea* by Euripides. The German troupe's top-notch performance skills, underpinned by the actors' mastery, allow for discerning a variety of exciting devices in the play, especially since the study is based on the performance's video recording, among others. What do viewers see when attending the performance in person? What kind of contact do they establish with the actors? And what do they observe when processing the performance in the video? What kind of text have we received from Euripides in the Greek language, and how phrases or words emphasized in the play are "conveyed" in different languages – or even in one language but translated by several translators – to provide a new angle on this particular work by Euripides which remains a *cause célèbre* to this day – not because Medea, daughter of the king of Colchis, is still persistently stamped as a filicide, but because the issues of relations between women and men, wives and husbands, of the ruler and his abuse of power, of the obligations of parents to their children, and others, as raised in this work, are as relevant today as ever.

Interpretations from the director and the troupe come across as idiosyncratic readings into the given work which – provided that the artists are up to the task in terms of high precision and quality – offer the researcher ample new food for thought: How one keeps what Euripides' *Medea* is meant to say while making sure that the performance is modern? What techniques does a creative employ to decipher the text? Is scientific study necessary when staging a classical play? What does a "living performance" mean? What does improvisation bring to the table? How is *in the here and now* created, and how does this principle work onstage and in the auditorium?

Keywords: *Euripides, Medea, Berliner Ensemble, Thalheimer*

Introduction

I saw the performance "Medea" by the famous German director Michael Thalheimer at the Batumi International Theater Festival

in Georgia. However, I was able to see this most complex structure once again thanks to a video performance published on YouTube. After watching the live performance of the

play, many questions arose, which I answered only after publishing the video performance. These answers may be controversial, however, to talk about The German Medea's heavy topics, made me transition very lightly, from one island of surprise to another.

“Medea is one of the most frequently performed of all Greek tragedies. With its universal themes of love, betrayal and revenge, it resonates with modern audiences” (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. xi). Editor David Stuttard, who also translated *Medea* by Euripides in English, writes in his foreword to *Looking at Medea*. Through Euripides, the troupe of the Berliner Ensemble seems to bring to life a traditional spectacle, which, at the same time, is a theatrical experiment reflected in rethinking the text, defiance of theatre clichés, improvisation as a must, showcasing gestures and the actors' pit-a-pat and culture of speech, also demonstrating motivations behind relations between characters, alongside top-level acting proficiency. The performance speaks to a deep knowledge of theatre theories which, in combination with performance art, creates a peculiar symbiosis. The actors onstage succeed in “baring their hearts” to the fullest, a spectacle of sorts. The conflicting relations between man and woman, Medea and Jason in this case, build on the broad hunter-prey notions. How does Medea resist male-oriented “public opinion,” which justifies Jason's actions but not Medea's? In the performance, Medea's tragedy lies not in her committing a series of murders or betraying her homeland and family, but in society's disregard for a women's personal rights and dignity. And to protect these, Medea transforms from a ferocious and yet spiritually wounded and pained victim into a hunter, a lioness on the prowl. Michael Thalheimer's *Medea* (*Medea – Schauspiel Frankfurt* (2013), 2020) symbolizes the perpetual lamentation of a rightless woman.

The decoration of *Medea* performed by the Berliner Ensemble on the stage of the Batumi Theatre of Drama: the dark ceiling-high wall comes across as a reflection of the once clashing but now static Symplegades (“The ‘Clashing Rocks’ which, according to legend, guarded the entrance at the Bosphorus to the Black Sea; they are also regularly called ‘Dark Rocks’ [...]. They ceased clashing together

when Jason's ship, the Argo [...] succeeded in passing between them. The name ‘Symplegades’ occurs first in Euripides” (Hunter, 1916)) blocking Medea's path back home to Colchis, explaining why the empty stage in the show's opening scene may resemble a black desert. And it is in front of this dark grey wall or rock that Euripides' *Medea* unfolds, with only a full moon possibly illuminating the darkness of the night. Throughout the performance, the dark sheer rock, which seems to tower over a raging sea, moves only twice: First when the decoration (stage design by Olaf Altmann), this abyss of Medea's or, generally, women's passions, starts thudding as Medea calls Jason in, convincing him that she has “turned over a new leaf” and trying to talk him into sending gifts to the king's daughter through their children, and then, for the second time, when Jason on his pedestal, who at this point might as well be dead, is lifted by modern stage devices up the smaller horizontal line of the enormous rock to drop at Medea's feet on the top. Medea (Constanze Becker), emerging victorious over spiritual struggles with herself, and her most beautiful arms against the backdrop of the black rock, starts off toward Jason (Marc Oliver Schulze) like a billow – how eerie the “conviction scene” suffused with Medea's magic powers is, and how Jason falls for her tricks in the hope of a new family, glory, wealth. The rumbling of the rock closing on her ex-husband also resembles the roll of some gigantic machine seeking to devour Jason, with only one person at the helm of this machine: an embittered, vengeful, lonesome Medea deprived of her homeland who knows that she is about to kill her own children with these hands.

A large portion of the performance's running time comprises the voices, gestures, and footsteps of the characters. Until the video scene, the actors are not “assisted” by effective music or prerecorded sound effects. Unlike the other characters, Medea's footsteps can be heard only in the closing scene, but not before, the director's way of emphasizing the futile efforts of the rest of the characters and their immovable souls, in which the person, in contrast to Medea, affords little room for thought, choice, struggle. Every character depends on Medea's actions, what she will do and how she will change the lives

of the play's characters. And the fact that she remains immovable until the closing scene serves the very purpose of illustrating her spiritual struggles. The characters' spotlights (lighting design by Johan Delaere, Ulrich Eh) focus the viewer's attention on the actions of the nurse, Medea, Jason, and others, and on the actors performing these roles. A complex process is underway onstage to achieve this, with every fleeting nuance making its mark.

"But I have thought before and think it now, how human life is nothing but a shadow" (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. 197).

This phrase in Euripides' play is announced by the messenger appalled at the sight of devastated people and, in Thalheimer's production, tasked with narrating the events unfolding in the palace of the king of Corinth, with Medea listening passionately and reflecting a whole array of forms of revenge, listening to the description of a gruesome picture of her own making, with its brutality also betrayed by her unmoving body, though she, poised and insatiate like a lioness, seems to crave a victim nonetheless, because she knows well that she will later commit an even greater atrocity, slaughtering her own children and beholding, along with their dead bodies, the helpless, frail corpse of former hero Jason, and sensing a dead soul in this man gradually decomposing before our eyes throughout the performance – not on account of adultery, sharing a bed with someone else, or of his attempts to abandon his children, not just because of working toward Creon's cause while hiding behind Medea's past deeds, but because he, coveting glory and possessed by its power, rushes headlong toward self-destruction, and only Medea has her heart set on stopping and reinstating him on the path of humanity.

This production of *Medea* is a model of the life of a contemporary woman, with state laws unable to protect her rights. On the contrary, she falls victim to the personal interests of those in power, something far removed from civilization, the reason why Medea's life is not a shadow of modern life but a reality composed by the director and the actors, one that cannot turn into an umbra given its composite structure, reflecting the problems and passions of "earthly" characters which, it appears, have not changed since the time

of Euripides. And this is why Medea's nurse, dressed in sackcloth, continues to appear, exhausted from retelling this story again and again throughout the centuries, though this time in the German language:

*"Ach, wär doch nie
das Schiff, die Argo,
durch dunkle Felsen,
die da aufeinanderprallen,
ins Land der Kolcher
vorgedrungen!"* (*Medea – Schauspiel*
Frankfurt (2013), 2020).

"Oh, how I wish that ship, the *Argo*'d never spread its sails and soared between the Clashing Rocks, slate-grey Symplegades, to Colchis and our home" (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. 169).

Although the feet of the nurse (Josefin Platt) have grown heavy over the centuries, she still manages to tread the tightrope connecting to Medea and reach her lamenting home – or, in the Berliner Ensemble's *Medea*, a ceiling-high steep rock or canyon, or maybe the gates of the realm of Persephone or Hades – with her body casting a shadow that may, for a moment, remind one of the famed crow ordained by nature to caw. An interesting opinion is offered by a certain critic after attending Thalheimer's *Medea* in Frankfurt which somewhat resembles our perceptions of the character: "As a messenger of a distant time, Medea's wet nurse initially panned the room for minutes, with arms spread out like wings, leaning forward like a grief-stricken crow, one foot in front of the other with unbearable slowness, as if she were carrying the weight of the universe on her shoulders" (Boldt, 2012). The chorus, consisting of just one actress (Bettina Hoppe), also joins the ranks of shadows or apparitions. A penumbra playfully extends over Creon (Martin Rentzsch) approaching Medea with an ultimatum, the dark half of his face camouflaging his hidden agenda from the sorceress or maybe feminine intuition-endowed Medea, who has been vying over the centuries with the valiant character makeup reserved for men, possibly outdoing them in improvising revenge.

When childless Aegeus first approaches Medea, he shows only a profile, side-view of his face, half-face, as it were. And he is so far removed from "Medea's wall," her story in the present, that he does not cast a shadow or

umbra on the wall, though the spotlight focusing on him casts a shadow on the downstage, effectively making Aegeus a sojourner in the realm of shadows. In the performance, Aegeus – ageing, travel-fatigued, broken, and hideous-looking utters his friendly phrase (Euv. Med. lines 663–664). This phrase brings a smile to Aegeus’ face (Michael Benthin), the only expression of joy used in the performance. In this scene, the king of Athens does not look at Medea; and in his smile we also discern male sexual bodily fluids that are unlikely to be pleasing to any woman, much less in Medea who is mourning her lost love. This is probably why Aegeus’ appearance “compels” Medea to cover her breasts and public area with her hands, a move immediately bringing to mind *Birth of Venus*, a painting by Sandro Botticelli. Medea learns of Aegeus’ problem and reasons for visiting the oracle of Phoebus, something that the man does not hold back, honestly telling the woman the whole truth:

“Zu fragen, wie aus meinem Samen Kinder wachsen können” (*Medeia*, 1981, p. 26).

“I went to ask how I might manage to beget children” (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. 184).

Medea – frightened or startled, with a somewhat scornful expression on her face – does not change position. Aegeus also confides the prophecy – a riddle of sorts – to Medea. After a long theatrical pause, the ruler of Athens pronounces, as though syllabing: “Des Schlauches Ende nicht zu lösen, bis ich zum väterlichen Herd zurückgekehrt.” eyeing his own hands, as though looking for the reason of his problem in them. “Aegeus is bidden in the oracle’s riddling terms not to have sexual intercourse before he reaches home” (Kovacs, 1994). Medea already knows the answer to the riddle. We may as well add that, as Aegeus reveals the oracle’s riddle, Medea, dressed in a shirt, again switches to the position of Sandro Botticelli’s *Venus*, though, unlike Medea, *Venus* is nude in Botticelli’s and many other ancient statues: “The nude *Venus* may assume a number of formalized poses, standing or reclining. Some standing figures originated in the religious statuary of antiquity, for example the *Venus Pudica* – *Venus of Modesty* – who stands somewhat as in Botticelli’s “*Birth of Venus*” with one arm slightly flexed, the hand covering the pubic area, while the oth-

er is bent so that it lightly covers the breasts” (Hall, 1974, p. 319). In Botticelli’s work, however, *Venus* covers her public area with her left hand, and her breasts with her right hand, while the positions of *Medea*’s hands in the performance are the other way around, making *Medea* a reverse version of *Aphrodite*, so her emotional state must be “read” antithetically to the essence of the goddess, with every attribute of *Aphrodite* rooted out from *Medea*’s current state as she is the goddess of the victims of male hunters, of rage and revenge, that is, the goddess of forsaken women known collectively as *Medea*. Since classical antiquity, the image of such women has been relevant and will continue for as long as women exist on this earth.

Here we must call to mind the scene of the first meeting between Jason and *Medea* in Euripides’ play, in which *Medea* includes her accomplishment on the list of Jason’s heroic feats. Jason proclaims *Aphrodite* to be the protectress of his heroic feats in Colchis, while crediting the arrows of *Eros* with arousing *Medea*’s love, in order to cast a shadow over her reason, her love, and to dodge the responsibility vowed to the woman. Perhaps *Medea* appears to Jason as a personification of *Aphrodite*, and all women in love are radiant and beautiful. After the vow is broken, however, *Medea* transfigures to become *Aphrodite*’s transubstantiated version, a possible reason why she, similar to *Birth of Venus* by Botticelli, covers her breasts and public area, though in a reverse manner, because she is not an earthly image of the goddess of love, being instead a woman frightened by the appearance of “a new man,” a woman disinterested in having sexual relations with another man. *Medea* is petrified of Aegeus’ modestly potent unconscious sexual bodily fluids. She, being endowed with feminine intuition, is capable of sensing male sexual attraction, an inherent talent granted to women by nature itself.

In the performance, *Medea*, in the scene where she first meets Jason, no longer senses sexual desire in her ex-husband. The ex-wife asks Jason ironically: “Was ist der Dank dafür?” (*Medea – Schauspiel Frankfurt* (2013), 2020) She removes her cape, her subtext clearly reading: “Look at me! See who I am now!” With her garment removed, a nearly naked *Medea* appears before the view-

er, with only a shirt covering her body, and sexually delineated, ripe feminine features clearly conveying her body's sensual passions of times past, something that once seemed so attractive to the beloved man. But now, looking at her makes Jason vomit. It is hard to love a woman who has been so passionate about devising acts committed for the sake of love and being based solely on her will, not the will of Cypris. Yet, conditions permitting, Medea could have welcomed Jason gladly, something likely to have been one of the major storylines allowing to see Medea from a different angle.

The fact that the shadow, umbra, or apparition is actively reflected in the performance is evidenced by the first scene with Jason appearing on the stage. Earlier in the scene, we do not see his shadow. But, since this character is actively moving around in "Medea's kingdom," being capable of switching from static to dynamic, his body casts a shadow, and does it repeatedly at that. One of the most important scenes featuring Jason in the performance marks his first meeting with Medea, when he, dressed in a blue suit (a symbol of Hellas and the sea), speaks of Medea's "loneliness in bed," reducing the woman's feeling to sexual desire, believing this to be the reason why she declares war on her husband. Next, he, with a fast and anxiety-filled gait, proceeds quite far from the upstage toward the audience, as though rushing to meet "like-minded people," only to say that:

*"Könnten sich die Menschen
doch auf andre Weise Kinder schaffen,
ganz ohne Fraun!*

*Viel Unglück bliebe
den Sterblichen erspart!"* (Medea –
Schauspiel Frankfurt (2013), 2020).

*"Mankind should beget children from
some other source and then there'd be no
need at all for women. And so, I think the
cause of every ill there is for men would be
removed"* (Looking at Medea, 2014, p. 181).

In the play, Jason argues that the cessation of sex life is the reason of Medea's torment, in this way once again insulting the woman. Of course, terminating sexual relations with a desired man is tied to physical torment, but considering Medea's "wild infurriation" only at this level would downgrade what this character has to say. But let's look

at this through the eyes of a man: How many men today have muttered under their breath or said aloud these words once pronounced Jason? And how many women have heard self-sacrifice out of love being discussed in the light of solely sex-based relations? This is exactly why Jason in the German performance seems to direct his phrases belittling women at the audience, knowing that he will find many supporters. Are these lines indicative of misogyny? Based on a variety of factors, a time of hatred always comes in relations between a woman and a man, a fact Euripides was well-aware of. But what the Ancient Greek author probably did not know was whether or not Jason's conclusion would become eternal, standing the test of time.

The theme of umbra and shadow is important in the performance in that it applies to Medea, the play's main heroine, whose unmoving and yet internally flexible body sometimes casts a shadow, though mostly seems to eclipse it and, like a statue hewn in rock, effaces her own shadow, as though fighting for a life in which the outcome of this fight will exist not as a shadow, but will bring about real change in the world of women, where Medea's character, personality, actions, relations and convincingness, determination, recalcitrance, unacceptability of her husband's adultery, and lamentation over the lost marriage bed are present, albeit to different extents, in every woman.

Looking at the dark empty space at the beginning of the performance, its mournfulness does not strike one as odd, because hardly any viewer coming to a performance of *Medea* by Euripides is unaware of Medea's disturbing story. But the odd part begins when one layer of "the double wall" opens, in line with the play, to expose Medea growling like a lioness, whose state of mind has already been made clear by the chorus and the nurse.

Medea shuns other people's counsel, and the nurse compares her adamance to stone and her innermost emotional state to a sea swell: *"Her friends try talking to her, but she's like a stone, a rolling sea-wave, unresponsive"* (Looking at Medea, 2014, p. 169). And since we are dealing with acting excellence here, the issue of likening Medea to animals deserves special mention in order to identify the source of character development

in the play. Let's have a look the first scene with Medea entering, a visible tuning fork of sorts setting the tone for this character. "Women are commonly associated with animals in Greek culture" (Konstantinou, 2012). In lines 92-93, the nurse addresses the tutor:

"I saw her just a little while ago, staring at them full of hate, smouldering like a bull, as if they were to blame" (Looking at Medea, 2014, p. 171).

"Euripides has, in fact, resorted to the bull's gaze to describe Medea in lines 92–93 and we know from other passages that the bull-like glance was, in a way, paradigmatic" (Konstantinou, 2012). "Gazing like a bull" in our real world signifies "*skewering with horns*" or *destroying*. In other words, the performer is "notified" of not only Medea's unconscious scheme to kill her own children, but also of the psychological state of a person capable of extreme brutality to trample down the enemy. Below is one of the nurse's phrase from lines 187–189: "...she glares at us, her house-slaves, like a bull or baneful lioness protecting new-born cubs" (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. 173). "Medea is also compared to a lioness a number of times. Rather than the emphasis on protectiveness found in epic lion similes, we find the lioness imagery expanded and modified to encompass her vindictive and ambiguous behavior" (Konstantinou, 2012).

These two animals, the bull and the lioness, become the attributes to characterize Medea's emotional state before murdering her children – at the end, Jason compares Medea to a lioness, adding the mythological Scylla to complete his portrayal of Medea as a phantasmagorical monster – that must have served the troupe and the director as their point of departure. In the performance, the woman's lamentation at first resembles the bellowing of a bull (PromoSounds, n.d.) later replaced by the thundering roars of a frenzied lioness (PromoSounds, n.d.) protecting her cubs. But combining these two mightiest animals, one domesticated and the other wild, and naturalistically producing their ferocious cries, is not the director's goal, because Thalheimer and the actress playing Medea create an absolutely individualistic "lamentation of Medea," which is unique in nature, unlike any other, being exclusive property

of Michael Thalheimer's *Medea* and getting a second breath through improvisation each time it is performed. At the same time, it has evolved based on a flawless, or rather scientific, analysis of Euripides' text, so this wailing and lamentation of Medea tugs at the viewer's heartstrings dead on, something implying the highest level of acting proficiency – because taking a wrong turn when exploding with "wailing and lamentation" even for a split second is enough to damage the actor's vocal chords. A lioness in a nature reserve, after giving birth to a litter, does not let anyone near her cubs – maybe with the exception of an animal care attendant, who proceeds with extra caution nonetheless – and is very dangerous. In the savannah, the lioness withdraws from the pride, seeking solitude to give birth (*A lion: description, characteristics and behavior*), n.d.). In bullfighting, for example, the fury of the bull has claimed many lives. We watched a video of an actual fight between a lion and a bull, a fair match-up. In the play, the nurse speaks of Medea's gaze, while the same assessment of the woman's spiritual state drives Medea's first scene in the performance – and it is out of the characteristics of an infuriated bull and a postpartum lioness that "Medea's bellowing" is born. Here we will quote Konstantinou who, after examining lines 187–189 from Euripides' *Medea*, concludes that:

"...the animal image here is mixed and incorporates an extraordinary animal glance of both lion and bull, as indicated in the composite verb *δοταυρόομαι* [...] Hence, Mastroiarde (2002 on Med. 187-188) argues that the glance of 187-189 is only intensified by the double animal image of bull and lion. In another Euripidean fragment (TrGF 689, 2-4), the powerful gaze is attributed to a bull about to be attacked by a lion, which leads me to think that the double imagery in this case includes simultaneously aggressor and victim, hunter and hunted, and Medea's gaze can, therefore, express both aspects of her moral and psychological dilemma" (Konstantinou, 2012)..

After the scene with "Medea's bellowing," we witness the characters butt heads, a process unfolding in Euripides' text like clockwork, something in perfect harmony with the Berliner Ensemble's art of performance,

which speaks to the scrupulous processing of every scene, move, and breath, and the text taken in by the troupe. Should actors overact and lay it on thick with emotions, the meaning of Euripides' text will fall flat, never reaching the viewer, especially since Medea's spiritual and physical activity, for the most of the performance's duration, unfolds in an area quite far from the audience. This, however, does not prevent the downstage and the auditorium from being filled with multifarious emotions, something that keeps viewers on the edge of their seats throughout the performance, catches them in a whirlpool of emotion like a sea swell, and makes them sharers of the characters' emotional experiences, making them feel like personally going through what is unfolding onstage – undoubtedly, the finesse exhibited here matches up to the dramaturgical prowess of Euripides.

The Pergamon Museum in Berlin preserves the Pergamon Altar with its friezes depicting the battle between the Giants and the Olympian gods. The altar's east frieze depicts the three-faced goddess Hecate.

“Medea: For by my mistress, black force of darkness, goddess Hecate, whom I revere above all others, my accomplice and my ally both, who has her dwelling in the shifting shadows of my hearth, there is no man alive or woman either, who will wound my heart and live to take their pleasure of it” (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. 178).

The comments to the Georgian translation of *Medea* by Euripides, and other sources, point out that “it is commonly believed that Hecate is the goddess of the moon, protectress of ghosts, nightmares, sorcery, and all kinds of dark forces” (Euripides, 2017, p. 166). “She helped Medea win Jason's heart and make magic potions” (*Myths of the Peoples of the World*, 1991, p. 269). “Poets depict Hecate as a horrifying monster with snakes for hair, snakelike feet, and three heads: one horse, one dog, and one lion... In arts she is portrayed alternately with one face, three faces, and three heads, because her images were often placed at road forks. Her attributes include dogs, snakes, torches, keys, and daggers” (Lubker, 1885, p. 595). According to Diodorus of Sicily (IV 45–46), “option: Hecate is Medea's mother” (*Myths of the Peoples of the World*, 1992, p. 131).

In light of the foregoing, something well known to Thalheimer's troupe, it is easy to deduce why the enormous wall is used as a décor element, with an in-built bridge in the form a frieze, Medea's stage for action, with its dark coloration, the silhouettes and shadows of the characters, and lighting imitating moonlight in illuminating the relevant positions of characters and developing them into artistic images, also lending motivation and meaning.

Medea is standing in the middle of a long space stretching into a horizontal strip – something that resembles a type of frieze – where, throughout the performance, she remains immovable for an hour and thirty-seven minutes, leaving the frieze only once, likely to kill her children, and returns nine minutes before the end of the performance. With her honor restored, she walks on the frieze, triumphantly steps over Jason's body, though remains within the boundaries of her small space, the reason why she is perceived as a living sculpture, or rather the frieze's high relief projecting, in line with the rules of architecture, further than halfway from the wall, though some moments in the performance's scenes feature Medea taking the form of a living bas-relief sculpture. Common everyday gestures are missing from Medea's action, explaining why she transforms into a living tragic sculpture, whose suffering and struggle so strongly resemble the innermost emotional state of the characters of the drama-suffused frieze of the Hellenic-period Pergamon Altar, the only difference being that, in the latter case, we know that the Olympian gods will eventually prevail over the Giants, while, in Thalheimer's performance, everyone is a loser, both new and old, and precisely this explains, among others, the gloomy coloration of the entire décor.

Medea's standing in one spot, nearly a magic circle, leads us to the eternal problem of a woman in general, one that no woman in the world can escape despite trying. At the same time, she is a type of sculpture that celebrates feminine liberation free from any moral laws. “She is not worried about ethical norms, because her essence is possessed with a sense of revenge in retaliation for humiliation (lines 1365–1366)” (Tonia 2017, p. 16). But a woman in love who sacrifices everything for a man becomes a victim much

like Medea, a dead-end of sorts limiting her freedom, to break out of which Euripides' and Thalheimer's Medea turns to such a tragic course of action.

The actors' costumes are quite noteworthy (costume designer Nehle Balkhausen): Medea makes appearance early in the performance dressed in ankle boots and a cape over a shirt. She removes her cape and remains nearly naked thereafter, dressed only in a shabby shirt, which the actress changes in her final scene with Jason, just ten minutes before the end of the performance; and, as we hear the sounds of her shoes and composed, resolute footsteps, this ripe lady wears a strict modern black dress, transforming into an elegant woman in mourning, beautified by her pain. Her refined manners are in contrast to Jason wet with rain, sea waves, or tears – as though covered in beach sand – standing up against the wall and receiving blows from Medea. Until this scene, Jason, unlike the other characters, is dressed in bright, vibrant blue suit; and, as he removes and tosses it during his argument with Medea, the colors of the flag of Greece, blue and white, spread before our eyes. In the final scene of Thalheimer's staging, Jason disappears as a symbol of a Greek man and civilization, instead appearing covered in mud and devastated, dressed in dirty grey clothing and if, in the beginning, the barbarian Medea is bellowing in frenzy, later she proves capable of engaging in conversation, arguing, devising a plan for destroying the Palace of Corinth, and calculating the outcome all the while; Jason's smaller wall sets off to raise him – tormented by the unbearable pain of devastation – higher and higher, all the way up to put him at Medea's feet – and it is then that director Thalheimer, by means of this seemingly simplest scene, lets us know that Medea's plan is to make Jason experience the pain that has previously caused rage in her and pushed her to seek revenge, with Medea's unconscious resurrecting things once hidden in the dark, such as betrayal of her homeland and father, her unfortunate brother, the gruesome murder of Pelias, followed by her husband's infidelity, and, most importantly, loneliness. We may also suggest that Medea kills her children not only to ruin Jason, but also to have her revenge on her own offenses than have turned

her into a murderer. Medea sees her children as Jason's heirs, taking them as continuers of her husband's character and behavior, while, by killing them, she seeks to weed out all "Jasons" rooted in men who, in their longing for glory and motivation to treat women as nothing, are capable of stooping down to anything. And if, in the future, Aegeus is looking forward to the barbarian Medea, the Greek Jason has no one to wait for him, as he is all by himself even in his homeland, consigned to slow death, vulnerable in the face of the prophecy or curse of the sorceress Medea:

"But you, as is a coward's due, will die all shabbily, struck on your head by a splinter of your ship, your Argo" (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. 201).

Medea's face bears four dark traces of black mascara once applied to flirt with her husband but now running down with tears as a sign of the eternal lamentation over four members of her family. She, driven out of her wits, must have scratched her lightly exposed breasts with her nails, and her bare legs show scars, probably from frantic aimless trudging. Because of repeatedly hitting the wall, her fingers show red spots. Her physical scars disappear when, in the final scene, she appears on the frieze in a black dress.

Medea's arm movements deserve separate discussion in that, as mentioned earlier, her body is alternately part of a bas-relief and high relief. Even Medea's cape-covered back is eloquent, because the actress' body has a precise task to fulfil. Her hands appeal to Creon in his judgement, but after realizing that the ruler is implacable, she clenches her fists in such anguish and frenzy that the king of Corinth feels the woman's threat in his bones, and his face shows fear. Upon Jason's entry, Medea covers her face with both hands in a childlike gesture, buttons her cape, and cowers, hiding. With her hands still over her face, she addresses him: "*Du feiger Mensch!*" Medea's arms bring to mind her pose from the scene with Aegeus, one reminiscent of *Birth of Venus* by Sandro Botticelli. And, at the phrase: "*Und warum trug dein Schiff dich hier an diesen Strand?*" (Medeia, 1981, p. 27) she covers her pubic area and breasts with her hands again, in this way drawing our attention to the fact that this detail should not be ignored.

Medea's left arm is leaning against the wall so as to make her resemble a bird with a broken wing, while her right arm is stretched out in supplication toward Aegeus wheezing out of his desire to have descendants. As Medea reveals to us her plan to lay waste to the rulers of the palace of Corinth, her arms, leaning against the wall, are not clearly visible. But suddenly you notice her longish snakelike hair curling from sweat and running down her breasts, and it seems that the invincible descendant of Hecate has been defeated. In this part, she visualizes the poisoned gifts sent to the king's daughter through the children: the golden coronet in her right hand and the amazing royal *peplos*. And it is here that her hands seem to personify her children waiting in the royal court for the gifts to be accepted, from hand to hand. And then her clenched fists turn the children into weapons, as she, like a wounded lioness, roars to justify herself:

“What can it profit me to live? I have no homeland and no home, no place to turn in all my sufferings” (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. 187).

Medea's white arms pressed against the dark wall become symbols of the children thrown off the cliff by their mother – and this is the pose assumed by the war machine devised by Medea and charging at Jason to obliterate him, with their two children as its key weapons. After achieving her goal, Medea is ready to toy with Jason, licking her wrists like a predator to bring tears to her eyes as evidence of “heartfelt” repentance while devising a new – or even final – scheme to lure Jason into a snare like a prey. That Medea is a top-notch player, and that game is in women's nature in general, is evident, among others, by the continuation of her second encounter with Jason. Here Medea, as though as a sign of reconciliation, slides her right hand down the wall where it remains during her argument with Jason over the gifts – and, as Medea remains still, Jason stretches out his right hand to her (“earlier Homer spoke of the sanctity of an oath reinforced by joining right hands” (Euripides, 1960, p. 487)) and then we see hands joined in near love. Here we must call to mind the scene of the first meeting between Medea and Jason in which the man offers “questionable help” to

Medea. In this scene, Jason, without looking at the woman with her back turned on him, reaches out to her with his left hand, and the viewer discerns a false promise in this mechanical gesture, something that Jason cannot hold back:

“But if you need some help from me with money for the boys or your exile, tell me. I'm ready to be generous. I'll send a letter introducing you to some acquaintances, who'd be use to you” (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. 182).

We may ask: Did Jason love Medea? Nana Tonia, after listing in her essay examples of Medea's cruelty, concludes: “And all this she accomplished with the most horrible evil deed because of Jason, who probably never even loved her” (Tonia, 2017, p. 11). In Thalheimer's performance, this is clear almost without a shred of doubt, and the joining of hands between Medea and Jason, the only instance of physical contact between the show's characters, raises mixed feelings – in this scene, only the viewer is aware of “Medea's false reconciliation,” while Jason is grateful enough to show warm feelings toward Medea. Jason's outstretched right hand is a sign of reconciliation and, as Jason believes, the peaceful end of the war, but not a sign of love. Elene Topuridze does not rule out Jason's love in Euripides' play: “...Jason [in *Medea*] belongs in society, so he, in order to claim material prosperity and power, suppresses his innermost natural love for his wife and his sense of duty, and his behavior is generally believed to be absolutely justifiable” (Topuridze, 2009, p. 39).

We would use “Lamentations for Children” as the title for one of the most brilliant scenes to the credit of the actress portraying Medea. “Maternal feelings clash with the thirst for revenge in Medea, and she changes her mind four times before finally realizing the inevitability of the children's demise” (Yarkho, 1999). In this scene, Medea the mother is sitting, casting a shadow behind her, this making her an ordinary woman, but her wrists, the weapons of Jason's ultimate destruction, are invisible – she is hiding them. But you also feel the warmest look full of love for her children on her face, and it is only now that you notice that both black tear tracks down her shaded cheek have almost faded away, while one of

the tears on her other cheek is half-hidden as a symbol of a half-destroyed Jason, and the other tear track, which remains intact, stands for Medea's eternally inexhaustible tear shed for her tragic fate mostly of her own making. And here we will once again turn to Euripides' text generalizing Medea's actions and, at the same time, combining both sexes, because passion is characteristic of both woman and man.

"My passion's stronger than my resolution, and this lust for vengeance is the well-spring from whose waters pour the greatest sufferings for man" (*Looking at Medea*, 2014, p. 194).

"...ich unglückliche Frau!" (*Medea – Schauspiel Frankfurt (2013)*, 2020) Medea says, and incidental music (sound design: Bert Wrede) is heard for the first time in the performance which accompanies the video (video by Alexander du Prel) in the form of a sad lyrical melody. Female and male figures resembling modern road signs appear alternately, and so do signages of a stroller, a heart, a bus, childcare, a toy horse, the sun, the sea, a second child... Medea's tragedy has transferred into the twenty first century, Euripides has withstood the test of eternity, remaining contemporary even today, because a woman is threatened by blows from all sides, which is conveyed in the form of symmetrical arrows pointing at a video figure, and Medea, tormented and bending in pain, is standing on her pedestal, or rather a gigantic monument of grief, bringing together the problems of women around the world, and fighting in their stead, with all film shots projected on her body, and there is no more bellowing in this story, though she too has a heart, which she has cut out with her own hands, and this makes you think: Is there a beast greater than an abused woman with her heart cut out?—this is what she is capable of! An enormous eye shape is projected on the wall, and a teardrop rolling from its edge hangs on its lower lid – Medea no longer has a heart, but she still has tears! "In conventional Athenian terms, Medea represents men's worst fears of what women may be capable" (Cairns, 2014, p. 137). In the daughter of the king of Colchis, Euripides shaped a new direction in human freedom. He charged his creative work with the task of protecting personal rights, in this way also lending the meaning of protecting

the most humane societal relations with this position" (Topuridze, 2009, p. 54).

The performance has two finales, one belonging to Medea and concluding with the video, and the other to Jason when he, thrown down on "Medea's frieze," makes futile attempts to grab her by her feet as she departs. The intense illumination must be a golden light, though Helios' dragon-driven chariot is nowhere in sight. Following the pleas of wretched Jason, Medea sets out to bury her children, though now she is neither a lioness nor Scylla. She is a woman with no tears left, dressed in black as a sign of mourning, and this immediately brings to mind Plutarch's description of the final moments of Pericles. Pericles, nearing his end, was surrounded by the best citizens and friends discussing his achievements, supposing that he no longer understood them but had lost consciousness. But Pericles was listening attentively, wondering why they were recalling his successes repeated by many other military commanders but overlooking his most important achievement:

"Ни один афинский гражданин, – прибавил он, – из-за меня не надел черного плаща" (Plutarch, 1994, p. 200).

"For," said he, "no living Athenian ever put on mourning because of me" (Plutarch, 1916).

Commentaries (1994), read that a black outer garment was worn as a sign of mourning over a departed loved one or some other misfortune (p. 673). Euripides leads Medea down the path of misfortunes and, most importantly, enormous injustice befalls her, something worse than death. Thalheimer's Medea leaves the stage dressed in a mourning garment and yet proudly, having done her duty to the women of the world.

The performance's characters, especially Medea and Jason, are turned by Michael Thalheimer into a public spectacle of spiritually naked people, with so much as one uncalled for or ill-considered movement or word, phrase or emotion expressed, potentially threatening to sever contact with the viewer. Through the German actors, a precise and powerful emotional charge reaches down in the audience's soul and settles in its psyche in layers, in an attempt to uproot traumas of the past. In the performance, Medea's path

of suffering has been joined by other characters, and toward the end you seem oblivious to their phrases, because you, possessed by the emotion generated by the actors, embark on a psycho-emotional journey into your own past, with the once sealed locks of your psyche removed and Medea's suffering burdening you with its weight, because in life you may have been both prey and hunter, gazing like a bull and acting like a lioness. In this process, the fourth wall seems no longer functioning, and the actors are not leaving the viewers alone, instead "following," by means of elements of cruelty, their past or present as a trauma-laden path of female-male relations, being sacrificed on the altar of their spiritual relief and liberation.

In terms of the art of performance, the Berliner Ensemble's *Medea* is in its entirety an experiment and a guidepost to the path of honing mastery and perfection. For 110 minutes, the characters hardly ever look at one another, and even when they do, it seems

accidental, at least this is what sticks in the viewer's memory – all characters seem to be acting on their own and yet their faces reflect the idea behind their opponent characters' phrases, a precondition for bringing forth their own remarks. The characters express a variety of emotions without "conventional" contact and yet interconnect with both their addressees onstage and the viewers. And this is indicative of the high proficiency of the Berliner Ensemble's troupe, something elevating the performance to the rank of top-notch theatre that exists "in the here and now," with a new world building on an absolutely real foundation emerging before the eyes of the viewer in a given brief period. And each time true art is being born is a sight to behold.

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