

Pasolini's *Medea*: A Twentieth Century Tragedy
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“Pasolini did not make Greek tragedy. He made very striking films about the myths on which tragedy is based.”¹ Although this comment by Greek film director Michael Cacoyannis was not intended as a compliment, it nonetheless provides an important insight into the three films based on Greek tragedies that Pier Paolo Pasolini wrote and directed: *Oedipus Rex* (1967), *Medea* (1969), and *Notes for an African Oresteia* (1970). In re-shaping ancient tragedies for the twentieth century, Pasolini did exactly what the Greek tragic poets had done centuries before: he used inherited myth to express timeless themes in a way that was relevant to a contemporary audience. Thus Pasolini’s *Oedipus Rex* interprets Sophocles from a Freudian point of view, and *Notes for an African Oresteia* is inspired by Marx, Freud and Antonio Gramsci, as well as by Aeschylus. This paper focuses on the *Medea* and shows how Pasolini re-interprets Euripides’ play with the help of Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade and Sir James Frazer.

Through the figure of the centaur (a stand-in for the director himself),² Pasolini shows us an over-rationalized Western civilization that is both fascinated and repelled by the pre-rational world view it had long ago abandoned. The key to the interpretation of the film is provided by three dreamlike scenes: (1) the Centaur’s poetic invocation to the nature deities at the beginning of the film; (2) a ritual of human sacrifice, performed in primitive Colchis (with Medea as high-priestess), and modeled on Sir James Frazer’s theories of the primitive agricultural god (sometimes called the Eniautos Daimon or Year Spirit) whose yearly sacrifice insures the fertility of the crops³; and (3) Jason’s dream, just prior to his ill-fated marriage to Glauce, in which a fully anthropomorphized, “rational and profane Centaur” explains to Jason that it is due to the continuing influence of the “mythic and sacred Centaur” (who has remained within his soul since childhood), that “despite your calculations and interpretations, in reality you love Medea.”⁴

The fact that dreams and ritual provide the film’s interpretive structure is not surprising, given Pasolini’s view that film, because it communicates primarily through images, objects and gestures, is fundamentally “oneiric” in nature, and that it functions on a “pregrammatical, irrational level,” similar to that of an “elementary stage of civilization.”⁵ Pasolini’s belief – expressed through the film – that an individual’s path from childhood to maturity mirrors the development of civilization from its primitive origins, and that “it is only possible to live the fullest life when we are in harmony with these [ancient] symbols,” comes from Jungian psychology.⁶ The dramatic tension in Pasolini’s film between a primitive, pre-rational Medea and a civilized, rational (but also rationalizing) Jason, is derived from Euripides’ play, but interpreted from a mid- twentieth century perspective.

¹ M. Winkler, ed. *Classical Myth and Culture in the Cinema* (Oxford, 2001) 81.

² N. Greene, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Cinema as Heresy* (Princeton, 1990) 159-60.

³ R. Ackerman, *The Myth and Ritual School* (New York, 1991) 126.

⁴ P. Pasolini, *Medea* (screenplay; G. Gambetti, ed.; Milan, 1970), 62.

⁵ P. Pasolini, “The Cinema of Poetry,” 168-69; in Barnett, L. (ed. and trans.), *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Heretical Empiricism* (Bloomington, 1988).

⁶ C. Jung, “The Stages of Life,” in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933) 112-13. Pasolini referred to Jung in videotaped interviews (“Pasolini sur Médée et Les Mille et une nuits,” *Pour le Cinema* 11/23/75, The French Film Institute) and in poems composed during the filming (Pasolini, *Medea* [1970], 110, 133).