

A Dream of Passion: Creating a Modern Medea

Jules Dassin's film, *A Dream of Passion*, is an understudied example of the reception of Euripides' *Medea*. Often neglected or considered a poor work of reception, and thus neglected in the scholarship on classical reception, with the notable exception of Marianne McDonald's *Euripides in Cinema*, *A Dream of Passion* in fact presents us with an intriguing and unusually effectively characterization of Euripides' famously confounding heroine. Euripides' *Medea* is full of contradictions: manipulative and sincere, a stranger in a foreign land and a woman at ease in her surroundings, admired by her peers; both coldly detached and passionately emotional. Although this *Medea* is unequivocally responsible for the actual murder of her children, at no point in the play is she punished or seen as evil for what she did, other than by Jason, towards whom all her malice was directed. I argue that Dassin's film is in fact a uniquely effective work of reception as it divides *Medea*'s apparently contradictory traits into two *Medea* figures, Maya and Brenda. In so doing, Dassin retains the complexity and challenges of Euripides' signature heroine while retaining the audience's sympathy for his leading women. My paper, in studying an unpopular work of reception, explores both the challenges faced by directors in translating live theater to film and the challenges we face as critics when presented with a work that strays from more traditional models of reception.

Dassin's concluding scene is a nuanced example of how he unifies the radically different perspectives of Brenda—an uneducated child murderer—and Maya—a canny and manipulative, but emotionless, actress. This scene blends cuts from Maya's performance as *Medea* in a live play with flashbacks to Brenda's infanticide. At times in the flashback sequence it is unclear if Maya is watching Brenda commit the murders, or is herself approaching the sleeping children. Maya thus becomes a part of Brenda's crime as her perspective and Brenda's perspective gradually merge. The flashbacks also replace parts of the concluding scene from Euripides' play

during which Medea would normally speak. Splicing Brenda's memories of her murder with the actual play indicates to the audience that just as Medea was allowed victory in spite of her crimes, so too should the modern audience forgive Brenda for hers. The audience inhabits the same sphere as Maya—rapt, saddened, and sympathetic witnesses, or perhaps accomplices, to Brenda's act of justice.

Bibliography

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