

From Medea to *Norma*

One of the most familiar stories from Greek antiquity is that of Medea and Jason, a mythic formula that has endured into modern times: the liaison, often with disastrous results, between a man from the civilized world and a barbarian princess. It has taken many forms over the years, but attendees at the 2018 CAMWS meeting are fortunate enough to be able to see it in one of its most famous representations, Bellini's 1831 opera *Norma*.

The story seems to have had its origins in Greek exploration of the Black Sea. Homer never mentioned her but had some knowledge of the Argonauts (*Odyssey* 12.69-72, 10.135-7); with Hesiod, Medea and Jason came to be well known (*Theogony* 340, 961, 992-1002). Greeks were learning about the lands around the Black Sea, probably searching for wealth and encountering strange lands and peoples (West 2003: 151-67). The story need not be localized in the region of Colchis--and hints it are apparent as early as Odysseus' encounters with Circe and Calypso--but Jason and Medea became the most famous ancient example of the basic tale. Yet any early detailed sources are lost, and it is only through Euripides' *Medea*, and then the Hellenistic and Roman constructs of Apollonios and Seneca, that the tale is best known today.

The outline is familiar: an adventurer comes to a remote land, a noble woman falls in love with him, and disaster results. The tale evolved from Jason and Medea in many incarnations: Cyrus and Tomyris, Alexander and Thalestria, elements of Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and even Rider Haggard's *She* and many episodes of *Star Trek*.

But an unusual aspect of the Medea story is the infanticide (Manuwald 1983: 27-61), which may not have been part of the original Colchian version. It may be a Corinthian development: late sources suggest that the Corinthians killed the children (Apollodoros, *Bibliothèque* 1.146); eventually it is Medea herself who performs the deed, in revenge for Jason's

infidelity. Infanticide (except under certain conditions of population control) was alien to the Greek world, a custom that was seen as barbarian (e. g. Appian, *Iberika* 72). To be sure, Medea had solid credentials as a murderess, but killing one's own children was going too far.

It is perhaps in opera that the Medea story has had its widest currency. Opera and the classics have had a symbiotic relationship ever since the genre originated, and Medea has been particularly popular with composers, perhaps beginning with Cavalli's *Giasone* in 1648 and continuing through many later versions, of which the most famous is probably Cherubini's *Medée* of 1797. But such is the strength of the tale that her avatar appears in operas that seem to be entirely different: most notably Wagner's *Tannhäuser*, and, some years earlier, Bellini's *Norma*.

The plot of *Norma* is familiar: an adventurer (Pollione) comes to a remote land, a relationship is established with a noble woman, and disaster results. Clearly the ultimate source is the tale of Jason and Medea, but the context is not Colchis but the Druidic world of northern Europe. Yet it is unlikely that *Norma* made direct use of any ancient material: the immediate source was Alexandre Soumet's *Norma ou l'infanticide* (MacGuire and Forbes 1992: 617-19). But more importantly, Bellini's librettist, Felice Romani, had written the text for Mayr's *Medea in Corinto*, one of the most important operatic representations of the story, and which was directly based on Euripides' tragedy.

Yet the opera has one important difference from the received version of the tale: Norma does not kill her children. To be sure, she comes close at the beginning of Act II, but realizes that their only fault is their father, and instead kills herself and is complicit in his death. The children survive, but ironically Norma first hands them over to Pollione's lover Adalgisa, whose presence set the plot of *Norma* into motion. Although she tries to kill Pollione, eventually they

go to their deaths together in an early version of redemption through love (Wagner knew the opera well). Thus Norma becomes the opposite of Medea: her violence against the children is turned toward their father, who in the ancient accounts escapes her revenge.

To be sure, *Norma* differs from Euripides, but the origins of the story are not hidden by the change of locale and the substitution of the exotic Druids for exotic Colchis, or even the saving of the children.

Bibliography

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