

## The Stage as a “Justice” Space: Re-visiting the Case of Medea in Peter McGarry’s *Medea* (2002)

Euripides’ *Medea*, the story of the mother-murderer, the scorned wife, the barbarian, the marginalized woman, has long fascinated and inspired the imagination of artists worldwide, making *Medea* one of the most widely staged ancient Greek tragedies in contemporary times. As Edith Hall, states “Euripides’ *Medea* has penetrated to parts of modernity most mythical figures have not reached. [...] *Medea* has murdered her way into a privileged place in the history of the imagination of the West, and can today command huge audiences in the commercial theatre” (1999). Indeed, *Medea* touches upon major issues of the human experience, such as gender politics, social identity, and family dynamics with which contemporary audiences can relate, translating the play’s popularity into numerous theatrical, cinematic, dance, and visual arts adaptations.

Most modern reworkings of Euripides’ play recreate on-stage or on-screen the full spectrum of *Medea*’s mad passion and revenge approaching it from different angles. However, they almost always let her go, in the euripidean manner, unpunished (at least legally) for “the most unforgivable crime in history,” her *filicide* (McGarry 2017). A refreshing and inspiring perspective is offered by Peter McGarry’s 2002 award-winning theatrical adaptation and compelling performance of *Medea*. McGarry’s *Medea* departs from the norm, presenting the eponymous heroine sentenced to suffer the torment and inescapable consequences of her murder by repeatedly performing her tragedy throughout time and space.

*Medea* and the Chorus (played by only one actor instead of the traditional group of chorus members), the only two characters on-stage, find themselves in a modern theater preparing to perform *Medea*’s tragedy again. *Medea* wonders why she must always be the one to commit such a base crime and the Chorus reminds her that they are obliged to constantly re-

perform their play so that the contemporary audience is taught what is *good* and what is *evil*, what is *just* and what is *unjust*. Unlike Euripides' *Medea* — the controlling character of the stage, an authorial figure who conceptualizes and performs a play-within-the-play to take revenge, and then leaves behind her a deconstructed stage-space — this *Medea* is reluctant to perform her part trying to find a way to escape the stage and the theater. The stage itself becomes her greatest enemy, who punishes her in the way that her euripidean enemies could not. Thus, in this paper, I argue that McGarry transforms the theatrical stage into a “justice” space where through *Medea*'s performed punishment the audience is invited to reflect on their own societal practices, which resemble the intentional murdering of *Medea*'s children.

Hall has insightfully argued that “*Medea* has transcended history partly because she enacts a primal terror universal to human beings: that the mother-figure should intentionally destroy her own children” (1999). Drawing on Hall's conclusion, I contend that the “justice” space of McGarry's *Medea* explores the dynamics of a similar real-life threat: that the motherland would intentionally “kill” her own young people. Written in the wake of 9/11, McGarry's *Medea* compares *Medea*'s “just cause” for revenge and killing her children with the wars that modern societies wage in the name of justice, vengeance, or even Gods which always involve the sacrifice of children/young people for the “greater-good.” Through *Medea*, McGarry calls into question the injustices of contemporary societies and the paradoxes of a world which advocates for peace and justice by sending young people to battle fields.

Finally, I conclude that Peter McGarry's *Medea* places a spotlight on an enduring facet of human experience and a major issue of Euripides' *Medea*, namely the problem of punishment and (in)justice in its many aspects. The “justice” space that McGarry creates for *Medea* and consequently his audience, compels the spectators to confront the dynamics of justice and

injustice in the motives and justifications of crimes, gender interactions, and the mechanisms of theater itself. Medea's internal and external conflicts and contradicting powers, along with her eventual escape have always had a disturbing effect on audiences, both in ancient and contemporary times (Segal 1996). However, her on-stage punishment provides modern audiences and societies with "a cautionary tale that speaks our language and scrapes away all the barnacles that have attached to this theatrical vessel during its 2,500-year voyage" (Prokosh 2003).

#### Bibliography

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