



MEDEA, HOW NOT TO CROSS THE FRONTIER OF INSANITY

MEDEA, COMO NÃO ULTRAPASSAR A FRONTEIRA DA LOUCURA

MEDEA, CÓMO NO CRUZAR LA FRONTERA DE LA LOCURA



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ABSTRACT

We propose an analysis of the dramatic narrative centred on the triad of woman, violence, and death. The myth of Medea serves as a powerful lens through which to examine the enduring subjugation of women by patriarchal structures—a theme that remains strikingly relevant today. Medea, portrayed as a woman, wife, and mother abandoned by her husband, chooses to confront the violence and oppression inflicted upon her simply for being a woman. As educators, we can engage students in critical discussions about Medea's story to illuminate the issue of gender-based violence. Presenting Medea from a classical perspective offers a compelling and emotionally resonant experience, particularly in youth and adult education settings. This approach encourages students to reflect on the boundaries of reason and madness in conflict resolution, both in ancient times and in contemporary society.

Keywords: Medea. Violence. Theatre. Death. Myth.

RESUMO

Propomos uma análise da narrativa dramática centrada na tríade mulher, violência e morte. O mito de Medeia serve como uma lente poderosa para examinar a subjugação persistente das mulheres pelas estruturas patriarcais — um tema que permanece surpreendentemente relevante nos dias de hoje. Medeia, retratada como mulher, esposa e mãe abandonada pelo marido, escolhe confrontar a violência e a opressão infligidas a ela simplesmente por ser mulher. Como educadores, podemos envolver os alunos em discussões críticas sobre a história de Medeia para elucidar a questão da violência de gênero. Apresentar Medeia a partir de uma perspectiva clássica oferece uma experiência envolvente e emocionalmente impactante, particularmente em contextos de educação para jovens e adultos. Essa abordagem incentiva os alunos a refletirem sobre os limites da razão e da loucura na resolução de conflitos, tanto na antiguidade quanto na sociedade contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: Medeia. Violência. Teatro. Morte. Mito.

RESUMEN

Proponemos analizar la trama del drama que muestra el trinomio: mujer, violencia y muerte. El mito de Medea es un tema que expone la subordinación de la mujer a la figura masculina, acción que se mantiene activa, moderna y presente frente a las inquietudes de la mujer,

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esposa y madre abandonada por su marido y que decide reaccionar contra la violencia y la subordinación que le impone sólo por ser mujer. Mientras que los educadores podemos analizar el drama de Medea a través de debates en el aula y poner de relieve la violencia contra las mujeres. La decisión de utilizar Medea desde una perspectiva de historia antigua es potencialmente sensible para los estudiantes y promueve el impacto emocional en la educación de jóvenes y adultos.

Palabras clave: Medea. Violencia. Teatro. Muerte. Mito.

1 INTRODUCTION

At the end of the XIX century, the feminist movement and simultaneously feminist literature took off, it strived to protect and strengthen women's rights. According to feminist writers, the cultural, social, and sexual life of women is controlled by men. The women demonstrated collective resistance, actively challenging entrenched structures of male dominance and superiority (Bobokhidze, 2018, p. 68). It is imperative that Brazilian educators adopt a critical pedagogical approach, denouncing such oppressive dynamics and equipping young women and adolescents with the analytical tools necessary to identify and deconstruct so-called toxic relationships, teach them how to identify the initial signs of abuse and convince them of the value of their independence and women's empowerment. The violence against women, based on their gender, is a historical and naturalized structure in Brazil², perpetuated by her subordinate position in the patriarchal sociocultural order.

The facts exposed by social media in Brazil, allow us to believe that we are living in a moment of fear, tension, and fright in the face of exposure to violence and aggression against women. The news about domestic violence transmitted by the media brings us the memory of the work of Guy Debord entitled "Society of the Spectacle"³, the author tells us that the disappointments of a human's existence led us to the denial of life that becomes visible through the media. Among disappointments, we highlight the violence against women in the current Brazilian XXI⁴ century. We add that death and violence have become a spectacle to be seen and shared through the media. As a result, the visual action of violence promotes a culture of fear and insecurity. It makes human relations difficult as the fight between individual and collective in societies seeking a culture of peace (M.O.Costa, 2007, p.9).

Faced with this reality, educators must denounce and alert young women and adolescents to the necessity to identify the so-called toxic relationships, teach young women how to identify the signs of the onset of abuse, and convince young women of the value of their independence and women's empowerment. The power relation is sustained by patterns of domination, control, and oppression, often resulting in discrimination, individualism, and exploitation that are transmitted from one generation to another in the private environment of family, relatives, and friends. Luciana M. Gebrim tells us that: the violence is based on

² The link <https://brazilian.report/liveblog/politics-insider/2023/11/13/violence-against-women-rise/> or the tools offered on the page.

³ In his analysis of the spectacular society, Debord notes that the quality of life is impoverished, with such a lack of authenticity that human perceptions are affected; and an attendant degradation of knowledge, which in turn hinders critical thought. Debord analyzes the use of knowledge to assuage reality: the spectacle obfuscates the past, imploding it with the future into an undifferentiated mass, a type of never-ending present.

⁴The Project 'Conflict Resolution through Classical Literature' forms connections between academic research in Classics and War Studies and peacebuilding education in two Latin American target countries: Brazil and Colombia. The project, led by Dr. Martin Dinter (Principal Investigator, King's College London) and Dr. David Whetham (Co-Investigator, King's College London), is characterized by its double aim of research and outreach.

historical conditions, and results in forms of discrimination against women; these actions are naturalized as social practices that allow attacks against their integrity, development, health, freedom, and life (GEBRIM,2014, p.59).

Starting from the principle that violence and death have become a spectacle to be seen, we invite listeners to reflect on the adoption and uses of the Medea tragedy⁵, represented in Athens in the classical period of 431 BC. This inspiration for this essay came from Rhodessa Jones in the *Medea Project*⁶, the theatre program for incarcerated women that she founded and directed. Jones believes that engaging incarcerated women in the process of developing and staging dramatic works based on their own stories pushes them to take control of their lives. In *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theatre for Incarcerated Women*, Rena Fraden offers a compelling and critically engaged narrative of a nine-year artistic collaboration between incarcerated women in the San Francisco County Jail and professional performers from outside the penal system. These artists, who alternate between the confines of the jail's rehearsal space and their lives in the free world, collectively explore the transformative potential of theatre as a medium for empowerment, resistance, and social critique.

We propose to analyse the plot of the drama which shows the trinomial words: woman, violence, and death. The Medea myth is a theme that exposes the subordination of women to the male figure, an action that remains active, modern, and present in the face of the concerns of the woman, wife, and mother abandoned by her husband in a foreign land where she has no support to help her. Isolation, low social status, foreigner and stress could have been as crucial factors that helped Medea to react against the violence and the subordination imposed by him maybe only for being a woman. As educators and Hellenist, we believe that classroom discussions offer a powerful lens through which to analyse the drama of Medea and bring attention to the theme of violence against women. The decision to use Medea⁷ from an ancient historical perspective is potentially sensitive to the students and it promotes the emotional impact on the youth and adult education. At the conclusion of the activity, we can

⁵ Medea myth through the story of Jason and his fight for the Golden Fleece. To regain the throne of the Greek state Iolcus, usurped by his uncle Pelias, Jason agrees to recover the golden fleece from King Aeetes of Colchis. The king agrees to give up the golden fleece if Jason can triumph over the magic forces that protect it. Medea falls in love with Jason, who promises marriage, then Medea uses her magic powers to allow him to steal the golden fleece.

⁶ Jones and jail officials were made aware of issues that were specific to female inmates, such as guilt, depression, and self-loathing, which arose in response to feelings of failure in the face of Community. THE MEDEA PROJECT: THEATER FOR INCARCERATED WOMEN to explore whether an arts-based approach could help reduce the number of women returning to jail. <https://themedeaproject.weebly.com/>

⁷ Medea is the production of the ancient Greek classic by poet Euripides, this drama is commendable in its ability to move the audience through the power of dialogue. Medea's drama shocks because she is triumph, leaving the audience bewildered, she gains liberation and administers revenge, but at the cost of the death of her children..

invite the young participants to reflect on and analyze the drama of Medea, considering how conflict is addressed in both ancient and contemporary contexts. They will have the opportunity to creatively explore and interpret Medea's story, sharing their insights with the group through a poem, a rap, or a performance that reimagines the myth with an alternative ending.

Through this activity, young people and adults can understand that the Greek dramaturgy shows that all citizens had the right to react, to bring the problems to the debate. The Greek society considers an abnormality the use of violence, and the theatre exposes that should be eliminated. The debate served to resolve disputes, suppress conflicts, and eliminate private violence (D. Cohen, 1997: 5). Violence against women is widespread and deeply rooted as well as acute. Greek women have limited freedom to escape the norms and traditions that dictate a subservient status for females. The violence that scars the lives of a huge proportion of Greek women and girls is rooted in Greek culture, customs, attitudes, and practices.

Medea shows we believe that where there is a fear syndrome, there are threats, and it seems to induce part of the population to react with more fear and violence. We ask ourselves before following the theme: After all, what is violence? According to Norberto Bobbio, violence is the physical intervention of an individual or group against another individual or group (N. Bobbio, 2004, p. 1291). The action shows a close relationship with the exercise of power defined as a relationship between two subjects, in which one imposes on the other one's own will as a means of obtaining some advantage or the desired effect (N. Bobbio, 2000, p. 161).

We consider violence to be anything capable of damaging a woman's body, as well as degrading or disturbing her integrity (Morais, 1981: 25). The use of violence sometimes aims at the destruction of something or someone through actions that have as their principle the feeling of hatred generated by someone who feels harmed and the victim of physical or moral offenses taken at a personal or group level. Both hatred and violence cause the victims to react moved by emotion (H. Arendt, 1994: 47) and sometimes seek revenge with their own hands. Aristotle in *Rhetoric* states that time can soften and even cure anger, but hatred is an incurable feeling and has as its principle the reaction and will to harm, avenge, and destroy the opponent, the perpetrator of violence (Aristotle, *Rhetoric*: 1382 a).

Hatred and violence mark the trajectory of the protagonist Medea involved in an act that denotes the abuse and use of psychological violence performed by Creon and Jason. The Medea tragedy is specifically defined as gender violence. In our understanding, gender is defined as a constitutive element of social relations based on gender differences and points

us to the primordial model of power relations. 'Gender' is a cultural concept defined how society builds its relationships, its sexual differences, and giving a different status to men and women (J. SCOTT, 1990, p.05).

Medea's plot evokes the question: What is the reason for the success of the playwriting among the ancient Greeks and in Modernity? Medea, in the eyes of modern criticism and Western literature, represents the violence of a barbarian woman involved in an insane or cruel Dionysian passion. Does Medea react violently because she lost of sexuality and Jason's sexual interest, or does she react in front of the arbitrary action of male power?

However, with all these negative attributes the Medea character overcomes the time and arrives at modernity as a woman who refuses to accept that betrayal, subordination, and abandonment remain unpunished. The revenge and the use of violence follow the trajectory of Medea from Colquida to Hellas in which Euripides makes clear the behaviour of the Hellenes by determining that we should always help friends and hurt twice the enemies (Candido, 2004, p. 22). Agon as clash, competition, and challenge, according to Jacob Burckhardt, has always been part of Hellenic society (J. Burchardt, 1929: 54).

Hesiod in the archaic period quoted in *The Works and the Days*⁸ recommends that if someone starts both saying and doing something impolite, be sure to pay him twice as much (Hesiod, v. 709). This quote tells us that responding to aggression, accepting a clash or confrontation held a positive value among the Greeks, and responding to any act of violence should be sought by those who considered themselves injured, or harmed at some point in the past. Starting from this principle, Euripides in the classical period materialized this practice through the tragic representation of Medea by quoting *I pray it will be enemies and not loved ones she hurts* (Medea, v.95), meaning that enemies should be harmed, but never damage their friends.

Elizabeth Bryson Bongie affirms from the very opening of the play Euripides is concerned with revealing the paradox of Medea's masculine nature as he shows her reacting to a set of circumstances that could happen only to a woman (Bongie, 1977, p.28). Anne Burnett and Albrecht Dihle saw the forces debating within Medea as gendered, that is, the monologue presents a conflict between what the audience would have read as a masculine, heroic, and public self and a feminine, maternal self. Interpreters generally view the monologue as a struggle between, on the one side, Medea's, sometimes heroic, passion for revenge and, on the other side, her maternal emotions or her rational deliberations in defence of saving the children (Foley, 1989, p.63). We can be asserted that although foundational

⁸ Hesiod was a Greek epic poet who flourished in Boeotia in the VIII B.C. He was alongside Homer the most respected of the old Greek poets. His works included a poem titled *Works and Days*, on the subjects of farming, morality, and country life.

figures of Western philosophical thought—such as Hegel, Freud, and Lacan—have extensively examined human relationships and behaviour, they did not offer commentary, reflection, or interpretation regarding the character of Medea. As the priestess of Hecate, Medea is portrayed as a *woman of fierce character, heinous nature, and relentless spirit* (Medea, v.105).

Euripides puts in the prologue the first indications of abuse against women when he says: *Medea, in despair, rejected by her husband, howls out "the oaths he swore" and calls upon the right hand, a potent symbol of fidelity, and invokes the gods to witness Jason's treatment of her* (Medea, v.20). Medea was a married woman, a foreigner, and a mother at a time when, in classical Greece, the female duty was limited to the home, without political rights and a particular social presence. The author complements that she lies *without food, her body is given pain, and thrown into tears all the time since she is discovered to be betrayed by her husband* (Medea, v.25), Medea presents herself as a miserable and dishonoured woman in a position of total subordination to the male figure.

For Euripides, the motivation of Medea's lament lies in the fact that Jason violates the law of reciprocity and mutual help established between the couple through the marriage commitment. The analysis of the poet's narrative focuses on the Corinthian region as pointed out by the narrative agents named Jason and Creon. The king of Corinth's decision to banish Medea determines her vengeance, and the plays include both partisans as enemies of Medea, dramatic tension builds through the contrasting failure of all attempts to prevent Medea's revenge and the growing strength of her determination (Durham, 1984, p.55).

Jason and Creon serve as subjects of the mythical narrative that allows us to identify the subordinate action of the figure of women in Greek society. We consider that there was empathy with the public in the Medea narrative because the act of marrying young was a familiar situation to Greek women. The female spectators in the Athenian theatre likely found resonance with the dramatic narrative of Medea. In ancient Greek society, choral performance was regarded not only as a pedagogical tool but also as a socially sanctioned medium for introducing young women of marriageable age to the public sphere.

Athenian fathers married off their daughters during their teens (13 to 17) to men in their thirties *for the bearing of legitimate children* (Xenophon, Memorabilia II.2–4). The birth of the first child conferred upon her a new social identity as an actively contributing member of her husband's household. The construction of the role of women in ancient society naturally as mothers and of a birth-giving agent, or maybe the beneficence of giving birth is relevant status.

The poet gives us little glimpses of the social place of women in Greek society, she says *that we women are the most unhappy beings: first, we need to buy a husband excessively and accept him as our lord, divorce is condemned to women, and the husband cannot be repudiated* (Medea, v.235). Euripides follows in the narrative informing her that *the young woman arrives at her new home without being educated about her new relationships and she must guess what the best relationship with her husband is* (Medea, v.240). The poet says that for *those women who play the role of wife well, the husband lives with them without the use of violence and life becomes enviable, but otherwise, death becomes desirable* (Medea, v. 245).

In the same situation reports Ischomachus when he says that his wife was taught by her mother *to exercise self-control* (Xenophon, Oeconomicus 7.14), it seems to be that his young wife was subordinated to silence, and him. The young wife was obliged to exercise self-control through silence; it's acting in the violence that seemed to be pervasive throughout the Greek world. These male quotations reinforce the belief that the main social function of the woman is childbirth. The Greek woman must find her fulfilment in the marriage and she must prefer the closed and sheltered space of her home and subordinate of the male figure.

In the drama, Medea says: *I hate my life. How can I put an end to it?* (Medea, v.95). We believe that all women in the same situation as Medea must find a solution. In the drama of Medea, she represents the victims of violence against women as any act of gender-based violence that results in physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women. Perpetrators of violence against women can be found in every society, nationality, religion, and age group, with all levels of education or wealth because in societies shaped by male/patriarchy, violence against women is an expression of unequal power relationships between men and women.

The sequence of the mythical narrative expresses the transition from Medea, she ceases to act like a victim because she does not accept the imposition of psychological violence, she reacts and acts as an active agent of the announced revenge. Medea identifies Jason's abuse when she says: *I am abused by my husband, carried off as plunder from a foreign land, I have no mother, no brother, no relative to offer me a security haven face of this disaster* (Medea, v 255). The construction of the identity of the foreigner in the figure of Medea seemed to be the modern immigrant, refugee, or asylum-seeker because this identity is not static but in constant flux. The foreigner is the object of desire, of exotic and even erotic fantasy, at the same time as representing great danger both to the physical citizen body, as well as the body of culture itself (Stratford, 2020)⁹.

⁹ See J.D. Stratford, University of Melbourne, j.stratford@unimelb.edu.au

Medea describes too by quoting the adjectives that qualified the couple's toxic relationship, namely: *traitor to their children* (Medea, v.15), *my husband, became the vilest of men* (Medea, v.230), *you, the most hateful to the gods, to me and human beings* (Medea, v.465). The expression of animosity denotes the power relation exerted by men in a male-dominated society. Medea's mythical narrative has served as the basis for women's struggle in a predominantly male world.

The question allows us to apply Michel de Certeau's concepts in the book *The Invention of Everyday Life*, we can say that Medea makes use of the words, of the arguments that belong to the male world to subvert the world of Creon and Jason, because both acting as became their masters of oppression. Medea acts as a Greek orator, and a logographer when she uses the words in the same way as an argument in the tribunal in Athens. She speaks according to the male standards of the Sophist group making the weaker argument defeat the stronger. Medea reacts to change their subordination position and decides to play as the protagonist and finishes the drama with a tragic ending. Medea plans her cruel revenge, and she, as a woman and foreign, takes justice into her own hands, defying the Gods and the men. Medea tells Creon: *I suffer the envy of some, and to others, I am a rival; but I am not so very clever. And then you are afraid of me. What harm can you suffer from me? It is not in my power — don't be afraid of me, Creon* (Medea, v.305). She lies and convinces Creon to let her stay in Corinth for one more day. But at the same time, she secures a new home for herself by helping Aegeus, the ruler of Athens, cure his infertility.

To achieve her purpose, she decides to kill the new Jason's bride, the king Creon, and her two sons. Her revenge begins with offering Glauce gifts, but the gifts are poisoned, and Glauce and Creon die, in the sequence, Medea then murders her children. The tragic ending is: no bride, no king, and no children, Jason stays alone without a descendant and madness. Euripides seemed to suggest that chaos and destruction would result should women ever act like men, act by themselves, demand equality, and throw off the constraints that their society places on them. For Melinda Powers, the Feminists bring to debate the degree to which Medea challenges or reinforces stereotypes about women as 'other', as foreign, the evil, conniving, obsessive creatures who need to be controlled (Powers, 2018, p.31).

The revenge and murder of Medea remind the *Medea Project* of Rhodessa Jones which uses the theatre program to promote the catharses in the incarcerated women. Generally, this incarcerated woman was involved in the depth of passion, and the so-called toxic relationships became anger, overtrade, hatred, and thirst for revenge. Medea's tragedy perfectly illustrates the degree of madness and savagery a deceived spouse could achieve and how much insanity could result from marital abuses and fraud. Jones believes that by

engaging incarcerated women in Medea's drama, and the process of developing and staging dramatic works based on their own stories, she can push them toward tapping into their creativity, confronting the problems that landed them in prison, and taking control of their own lives.

The partial conclusion: Medea reveals the mechanisms and moments through which violence against women is enacted and perpetuated within a patriarchal society. She embodies the tragic response of women subjected to relentless abuse, serving as a powerful symbol of the psychological toll such violence can exact. Her story underscores the urgent need for women to recognize the first signs of abuse and violence, she must seek support, find protection, and learn how to cultivate self-empowerment. We affirm that empowered women are resilient and strong enough to not cross the frontier of insanity. They know they are not fighting alone, and they do not succumb to the extremes of despair that lead to self-destruction as suicide or acts of violence as murder.

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