

# ***MEDEA ADAPTED: THE SUBALTERN BARBARIAN SPEAKS***

**by**

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Chris for believing in me, encouraging me, and supporting me along the way. I would never have embarked on this project, or completed it without his help. It is also dedicated to my three lovely daughters Stella, Danae and Sofia who have helped me in more ways than they will ever know. Finally it is for my exceptional parents, Basil and Mena, who are always there for me whatever I do, wherever I go.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ever since it was first written and performed in Athens in the fifth century BC, *Medea*, Euripides' dark, ambiguous and controversial tragedy has mysteriously enchanted artists and audiences alike. The reception of its first performance was not what we would nowadays call favourable (Blondell, 1999) and did not foreshadow the two and a half millennia that would follow, during which – especially after the Renaissance – it would be translated, adapted, re-written, re-made, and transformed in an overwhelming variety of ways for the stage.

The plot of Euripides' play centres on Medea, the barbarian protagonist from the distant land of Colchis. The action opens in Corinth where Medea finds her position in the Greek world threatened, having been abandoned by her husband Jason who decided to advance his station by re-marrying the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. Medea destroys both Creon and his daughter by means of a poisoned robe which clung to the flesh and burned it. Then, despairing for the safety of her two sons, and wishing through them to injure Jason in every way, she kills them too. Finally, rescued by supernatural means in the chariot of the god Helios, she escapes to the city of Athens to take refuge with the old King Aegeus.

The Athenian audience who watched the first performance only awarded it third prize out of three in the Great Dionysia festival of 431BC. Perhaps Medea's infanticide offended them. Or maybe they saw in the play a critique of the Athenian "imperial dream" of conquering and civilising the other city-states; after all this was the year that saw the beginning of a thirty-year war with the city of Sparta and feelings of patriotic enthusiasm and military pride were high. Their problem with any "barbarian" was almost certainly on the level of politics and civic identity. As Edith Hall (1991) maintains, the key distinction which the Athenians drew between themselves and barbarians was political: the Greeks were democratic and believed in equality whereas the barbarians were tyrannical and supported a

system of strict hierarchy. Hall further points out that one function of the tragic performances in Athens was “to provide cultural authorization” (p.2) for the democracy that they were so proud of. Seen in the light of the above, the negative reception of the *Medea* is understandable. The Athenian audience watched a play in which the barbarian heroine openly questioned the democratic structure and principles of their city, and therefore they must have viewed *Medea* with scepticism and some reservation.

What must have further troubled the Athenian – predominantly male – audience were the heroine’s words when she talks of herself as being: “Kind to my friends; implacable to foes. / To such as live like me the glory goes”(Euripides, 1988, 1.810-11). These attributes were the epitome of virtue for a male hero, to help his friends and harm his enemies and in doing so acquire honour and glory. It must have been hard to empathise with a woman, and a foreign one at that, who embodied masculine characteristics. Finally, Medea also violated in the most drastic way the positive ideals and desirable stereotypes of Greek womanhood – sexual restraint, deference first to one’s father, then to one’s husband and above all devotion to her children.

Yet despite that first disappointing reception, *Medea* survived on a variety of stages, in a variety of forms well into the twenty first century. The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama ([www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk](http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk)) lists eight hundred and ten entries for productions of the play from 1539 to 2009. Marianne McDonald (2003) mentions fifty operas based on the myth of Medea, while in the performance programme for a Columbia University Production of *Medea*, (January 2009) Professor Helene Foley maintains that *Medea* has been the single most popular Greek tragedy since the nineteenth century in the United States. As for the UK, according to Hall and Macintosh (2005a), there were periods in the 1990s when more plays by Euripides and Sophocles were performed on the London stages than by any other playwright, including Shakespeare.



*Medea* has not only been immensely popular for the issues it foregrounds, but also as a play which contains one of the most attractive roles for actresses in all of theatre history. Medea's popularity and versatility as a theatrical character has become apparent in the range of her manifestations on the stage. The role has launched the careers of many leading ladies while at the same time it has also served as a career highlight for already established actresses, prima donnas, prima ballerinas and even male castrati – not to forget the more recent allure for male actors attracted by an irresistible drag role (see Foley, 2004). Among the many other stars who have performed the role, Macintosh mentions Sarah Bernhardt, Maria Callas, Diana Rigg, Fiona Shaw, Isabelle Huppert and Martha Graham (Hall et al., 2000, pp.3-4).

This apparent popularity contains a strange paradox. Theatrical tradition and popular consciousness have come to associate Medea with the bloody act of infanticide which, in any age, society, or religion, is probably the single most heinous act for a woman to commit. Therefore being a murderess of her own children can surely not be the attribute which has secured her longevity on the stage or film directors', poets', composers' and audiences' fascination with her. Because, though it is true that evil characters are often attractive to actors and audiences alike, Medea seems to fascinate not simply as an evil character but as an alluring oddity. What is it, then, that feeds a continued fascination with this play and this character? How do we overcome Medea's act of individual and unnatural evil and ultimately find it so useful, that we keep returning to it in so many different contexts?

The answer lies in understanding this play as Euripides' quintessential tragedy of alterity, as a play which is not simply about a woman mad with jealousy and rage at being rejected. It is, rather, a play about the subaltern, the Other, the misfit, the stranger, the woman who is "deserted, a refugee, thought nothing of" (Euripides, 1955, l.255). It is a play about the barbarian's powerful ability to restore her own dignity and achieve justice. Seen as such the play can function on a different level. It is a "radical" play because it uproots traditional

beliefs related to gender, politics and culture which lay at the heart of Athenian society of the fifth century BC and I suggest that it is this attribute of the play that has inspired a number of playwrights to adapt it as a political allegory.

I base my argument on the premise that Medea's actual act of infanticide is in itself extreme and radical too, but I do not treat it as the "unnatural", "abhorrent" "counter-intuitive" act that it is traditionally portrayed. I consider it, rather, an act which annihilates traditional hegemonic structures, and which functions as a spark to provoke uncompromising, radical remakings of Euripides' play.

This thesis offers a close reading of three texts which use *Medea* to raise issues related to cultural and sexual difference, hegemony and the colonial encounter within their own cultural and historical context. It shows how these plays present complex and strongly oppositional voices and utilise the radicality of the Euripidean text and the subaltern status of its heroine to foreground their own critiques of political and social structures. Furthermore, it illustrates how the intersection of gender and colonialism, and the issues of alterity, of gender, ethnicity, culture, and class, are dealt with throughout.

The plays I examine here are Heiner Müller's *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscapes with Argonauts* (1983), Guy Butler's *Medea* (1990) and Olga Taxidou's *Medea: A World Apart* (1995). I will demonstrate how these plays have been utilised as political texts in various postcolonial situations, and how they use postcolonial and anti-imperialist discourses to adapt and appropriate the classical *Medea* as a postmodern, postcolonial protest narrative. I will argue that the purpose of these adaptations is to shed an alternative light on Medea's act of infanticide, to explore it as an act of self assertion and refusal to live in the 'limbo' between her own cultural heritage and the dominant colonial power Jason represents. In the plays in question Medea chooses to break this binary division and carve her own path of survival, and thus her act constructs an expression of liberating heroic defiance and not of

hot-blooded revengefulness. As a result, these adaptations turn us away from her act of infanticide as being a monstrous “unnatural” deed and we go so far as to see it as an act of protecting her children from suffering a fate similar to her own.

Furthermore all three texts have “strategic political agendas” (Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996, p.11) and can be positioned along trajectories of post-colonial discourse. The Medea figure in them is not a victim of circumstance, but a symbol of post-colonial survival; she fights against Jason as the individual who did her injustice, but more importantly she opposes the society that allowed that injustice to happen. Her act, as I suggest in this thesis, acquires a specifically political quality which aims at the continued destabilisation of the cultural and political authority of colonial imperialism.

However, though *Medea* is a classical text taken from the ancient Greek canon I suggest that it is not re-made into a counter-discursive narrative in order to question the canonicity of the text or its part in the culture of the coloniser which it seeks to dismantle. Because, though the classics are of course part of the high culture and the classical civilisation that the coloniser would have imposed on the colonised through secondary and University education, the *Medea* specifically has hardly ever been part of the average curriculum in any educational establishment. Indeed as numerous scholars point out, there have been long periods since its revival in the Renaissance when it was almost completely absent from the educational and the theatrical scene, precisely because it was not one of the texts which were thought to set and promote the high standards of Western European culture (see Hall and Macintosh 2005b, Hall, Macintosh, et. al. 2000, and McDonald, 2003).

Therefore, the adaptations examined here are not approached as texts whose single purpose is to defy canonical structure by subverting Euripides as an authority, or the source text and the place it holds within the cultural legacy of imperialism. They use, rather, the critical discourse of postmodernism which Philip Auslander describes as “an elusive and

fragile discourse that is always forced to walk between complicity and critique” (1994, p.31): on the one hand the playwrights accept the cultural power of the source text therefore comply with it, while on the other hand they use the myth they are retelling to make a subversive political statement, and thus critique it.

All three of the playwrights have stated that they returned to the Greeks because there they found some form of desired expression. Müller writes that “the Greek tragedians understood the power of theatre”(1993, p.18), while Butler (1990) explains that he turned to the Greek dramatists and more specifically Euripides’ play because there he found the perfect expression for his concerns. Finally Taxidou chooses to adapt Euripides because he is “the most radical of the [Athenian] playwrights ... [who] questions the role of character and individuality within the limits of the democratic *polis*”(Taxidou, 2004, p.106-7). So, rather than see *Medea* as a ghost of the Empire that the subaltern can re-invent to undo imperialism, the playwrights embrace the cultural power of the text and then proceed to take it apart and interrogate it, in order to urge the audience to re-view it and to re-read its underlying political agendas. They use the thematic relevance of the play and the radicality of the character’s actions to “deconstruct significations of authority and power...and by implication to intervene in social conditioning”(Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996, p.16), thus giving voice to the subaltern heroine.

Indeed I would argue that this is one of the characteristics which makes these performances postmodern even though, as Nick Kaye’s study of the relationship between postmodernism and performance suggests, the term evades any definition or categorisation (1994, pp.1-23). As such the adaptations in question, offer a postmodern interpretation of Brechtian performance strategies on stage, which result in politically engaged theatre. They follow a contemporary perception of what Brecht termed “epic” in that they surrender the old characteristic quality of suspense as well as the attempt to lure the audience into identification

and emotional release. They oppose any means of representation that would suggest that history cannot be altered; they invite spectator response and shatter the illusion of the world of the play by connecting it to contemporary reality.

A significant characteristic, suggesting the above connection to Brecht's proclamation that the author "is not the creator of an original work, but someone who produces from the materials of history" (Wright 1989, p.1), is the evident intertextuality of these plays which can be seen in connection to the concept as developed by Roland Barthes. Barthes suggests that all writing, like all cultural production, is an interweaving of already existing cultural material. In thousands of conscious and subconscious ways we draw upon what has come before us and all that exists around us in everything we create. In his seminal essay "The Death of the Author" (1977) he maintains that all writing, none of it original, exists within a "multi-dimensional space" within which it blends and clashes resulting in a text which "is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture"(p146). "Any text", he continues in his "Theory of the Text"(1981), "is an intertext", and while other texts are always present in it they are not always there as acknowledged sources or influences. They are present as a subterranean "general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations"(p.39).

A further connection to postmodern performance can be made if we consider how Marvin Carlson demonstrates the application of Barthes' theory of intertextuality to the theatre, by using it as a premise for his own theory of "haunting" which he describes as occurring more specifically in the theatrical text but also in the theatre in general. Carlson shows how postmodern theatrical theory and practice is particularly concerned with the concept of "recycling" material and re-using it freely "in unexpected and innovative juxtapositions" to create "new relationships, effects and tensions" and to summon up traditional theatrical and historical ghosts (2003, p.168). But the initial haunting, he argues,

which is as old as the theatre itself and has developed alongside the theatre up to the present day is on the level of already familiar narrative material. Carlson illustrates how through the repetition of old familiar myths, past plays, and productions on the stage, each performance event becomes in itself an act of the construction of memory.

It is in this light that I approach these three adaptations of *Medea* and argue that they act as cultural memory. Through them the protagonist, the playwrights and their audiences come to term with their past in order to be able to face their future, just like the mythical heroine from Colchis, the subaltern barbarian, who comes face to face with imperial colonialism to regain her lost identity. In answer to Spivak's (1988) concern that the subaltern woman cannot speak because her voice is muted, I would present these adapted, radical Medeas as the subaltern, the displaced outsider, who *can* speak and be heard. "I am Medea" she says in *Medeamaterial*, and we, the audience, the world around her, are forced to listen to her and acknowledge her as the ultimate subaltern whose voice is heard throughout history.

Finally I argue that in writing their adaptations of *Medea*, Müller, Butler and Taxidou have followed the postmodern concept which, as Philip Auslander defines it, is "a way of historicizing the contemporary in the Brechtian sense of getting some distance on the world we live in and thus gaining a better understanding of it" (Auslander 1994, p.6).

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## CHAPTER ONE

### MEDEA, CONTEMPORARY MATERIAL IN EAST BERLIN SUBURBIA

The Medea created by East German playwright Heiner Müller is not a woman who remains a victim of patriarchal, imperialist society. She shatters the confines of barbarian Otherness which that society had placed her in, and radically re-defines herself. Her act of infanticide acquires a socio-political significance since she does not recognise her sons as her own offspring:

Who are you [she wonders] Who has dressed  
You in the bodies of my little children  
What animal is hiding in your eyes  
Do you play dead You don't deceive the mother  
You're actors nothing but liars and traitors(Müller, 1984a, p.132)<sup>1</sup>

She sees her children as an expression of the corrupt society that has victimised her, since they are “products” of her union with Jason who represents that society. Therefore in killing them she does not murder her own flesh and blood; instead, she strikes a blow against the system which has produced them and which they would help preserve if they remained alive.

Müller uses the myth of Medea to critique western colonialism and to expose the destructiveness of consumer society. His adaptation is composed of a sequence of narratives which take the form of poetic theatrical representations in verse and visual landscapes. *Medeaplay* (1974), and *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscapes with Argonauts* (1984) together formulate a provocative, politicised vision of reality, characterised by a multitude of dense allusions and parallels to the Medea narratives of antiquity.

In these theatrical texts Müller goes beyond the confines of a simple adaptation of the myth of Medea. He interrogates the classic narrative and takes it apart to then re-construct it into an entirely new fragmented text. His intervention in the ancient epic can be compared to a radical surgical operation, in which he dissects the linear, well structured narrative, to get to



its meaning and to connect it to the world he lives in. His work is a daring theatrical re-interpretation of the *Medeas* of Euripides and Seneca, a postmodern collage that infuses the classics with an unsettlingly familiar feeling of desolation and fragmentation. It is scattered with the intertextual history of the myth, while at the same time making contemporary historical and political allusions.

Müller's style of writing is a conscious focus away from a mimetic representation of reality, which he found "non-photographable" in the East Germany of the seventies and early eighties, and towards a reflection of a fragmented, political reality as he saw it in the late cold war society of the GDR. In an interview with Carl Weber (1984) he explains that he moved away from photographic representations of reality in his works because realism was not an adequate form of representation for East German audiences. "Photographic" plays, he maintains, cannot work in a country where "actors cannot even say 'Guten Tag' without it sounding like a lie." What worked best was any production which involved a "stylized removal from immediate reality"(p.137).

According to Weber, Müller's dramaturgy first moved in experimental directions in 1976, after his return to Europe from an extended period of stay in the United States. In this choice of his, Müller moves away from Brecht, of whom most scholars saw him as "the most obvious successor" (Wright, 1989 p.122; also see Barnett 1998, Teraoka 1985, Weber 1984). He moves away from Brecht's high modernist ideals, the acceptance of one universal political truth, to a postmodern dramaturgy of disruption and experimentation which reflect the reality of the East Germany that he lived in. By his own admission "to use Brecht without criticizing him is a betrayal" (Wright p.122) so he consequently produces work under the Brechtian influence but without maintaining the centrality of Brecht's characters and the clearer narrative form of his epic drama.

Like Brecht, Müller believes that in order to come to terms with contemporary reality and also understand our future, we need to delve deep into our history and its significance. However, unlike Brecht, Müller does not feel that the epic theatre is in itself enough to promote change because he sees the world he lives in – and more specifically the western world close to the end of the cold war – as being on the threshold of a new history. He believes that the marginal characters of western drama are now forming its new core, becoming its centre (Kalb, 1998).

I suggest that this explains Müller's choice of Medea as the central character of his play, as she represents a number of marginal sections of society in terms of her foreignness of birth and upbringing, her gender, and her concept of what is just and appropriate in contrast to what is considered just and appropriate in "civilised" Corinth. Through Medea's violent actions therefore, Müller seems to propose a violent rejection of socially appropriate and acceptable forms of resolution to the problems faced by those in the margins of society. At the same time he also seems to be suggesting that a new history can only begin when the old one has ended - or has been destroyed: Medea stops the creation of new humans, especially ones that come from the coloniser, oppressor Jason.

*Medeaplay* (1974) became his first published exploration of a dramaturgical vision that he called "the theatre of images". It is a refinement of his use of poetic language for the stage which takes the form of a paragraph-long, descriptive literary sketch. Despite its brevity, however, it is dense with meaning. A woman, dressed as a bride, is shown tied to a bed, which is placed upright on the stage, by two male figures with death masks. The bridegroom enters and "takes his place with the bride" before a female audience, and the phrase "The Sexual Act" is projected on a screen. Shreds of the woman's wedding dress are used to gag her while her "belly swells until it bursts" and "The Act of Birth" is projected. The final projection is "The Act of Killing". In the nightmarish concluding vision, "the woman takes

off her face, rips up the child, and hurls the parts in the direction of the man. Debris, limbs, intestines fall from the flies on the man”(p.47).

This “mimodrama” as Macintosh calls it (Hall et al., 2000, p.25), is Müller’s initial attempt to exploit the act of Medea’s infanticide as a radical act of defiance against the male oppressor and coloniser in the form of her violator. “The Sexual Act”, “The Act of Birth”, “The Act of Killing” are all part of the assault and degradation of the female figure that is used as a sexual object, tied to her bed, and silenced. The mute quality of the play text simultaneously suggests the silencing of the female voice and the suppression of the colonised subject. However it might also imply the woman’s *refusal* to “use the master’s tools”, to speak the master’s language because as Audre Lorde famously said, “the master’s tool will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984, p.112). By speaking the language of the imperial coloniser Medea would be reifying his authority, his ability to determine which tools are effective. In that way the act of “dismantling” would simultaneously be rebuilding his power. Instead she prefers to act by using her own tools, by asserting her own authority. In that way she brings about genuine change. Therefore we witness the reciprocal return of the violent act onto the violator who presents the oppressor and coloniser: the child that he has fathered, the result of his oppression, is “thrown back” at him in shattered pieces.

Müller’s experimental piece which followed *Medeaplay* is a more obvious reworking of the Medea myth. The complete absence of punctuation, not only in the text, but also in the title: *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscapes with Argonauts* immediately strikes the reader. Absence of punctuation suggests a total absence of world order. At the same time the three titles fuse into one another inviting us to see this text as a whole that is made up of three inseparable parts, and that the “material” provided by the myth of Medea for the central part can best be comprehended within the context and framework of the barren wasteland

described in *Despoiled Shore* and the dreamlike horror which permeates *Landscape with Argonauts*.

The Medea trilogy is a play about alienated humanity, sexual inequality, betrayal, the destruction of a civilisation, and the end of an era. But it is also more importantly a reworking of Euripides' text to turn the myth of Medea "the colonised" into an allegory about political corruption, hypocrisy, imperialism, colonialism and environmental degradation. It is an attempt to turn the focus away from Medea's act of infanticide as an abhorrent act of murder and focus on it as a political gesture of the subjugated subject of imperialism against her oppressor.

The way in which Müller deals with the theme of infanticide in relation to Medea and the "despoiled", dehumanised, industrialised environment which he dramatises, foregrounds her heroic position – despite the heinous murders she commits – in the multitude of dramatisations of the ancient myth since the beginning of the twentieth century. In Müller's thematic tetralogy she is not held responsible for murder. In fact she seems to be justified in not wanting to let her children live in this world of political and environmental degradation. Babies are either the product of rape as seen in *Medeaplay*, or the product of advanced capitalism's inhumanity, ejected in mass-production "in batches" as a defence "against the advance of maggots"(p.127). If in Euripides Medea is a "hateful woman" a "monster" and "a murderess of children"(Euripides, 1955, l.1407), in Müller she is the product of an equally perverse capitalist society which is guilty of odious crime.

The first part, *Despoiled Shore*, was written thirty years prior to the play's completion in 1982. Here Müller was clearly influenced by the atrocities of the Second World War, but also by the severed political reality of East Berlin, and he paints the image of a deserted, bare, polluted landscape, littered with symbols of a corrupt, consumer society. In an uninterrupted politically charged discourse, he exposes a list of images that are representative of a

wasteland. Weber points out that this first part of the trilogy “evokes East Berlin suburbia...a polluted landscape swarming with people whose minds are just as polluted”(1984, p.124). The scene is set in a “lake near Strausberg” which Ivar Kvistad (2008) claims possibly refers to Strasbourg, the industrialised city in the east of France as a symbol of modern industrialisation. The lake is polluted by products of consumer capitalism which are clearly destroying the environment: empty boxes from used condoms, cigarettes, and cookies litter the scene. Death is present everywhere: “Dead branches”, “Dead fish”, “Women smeared with blood”, dead in the morgues, and corpses “HANGING FROM LAMPPOSTS THEIR TONGUES PROTRUDING”(pp.127-8), in a reference to the way deserters were hanged at the end of the Second World War. Taboo images of rejected human fluids (menstrual blood, semen, spit, vomit, urine, faeces) render this place contaminated, indicating that humans are killing themselves by destroying their environment.

In a masterful way the Medea myth is interwoven in this text of environmental destruction and death. On this “Despoiled shore ... flatheaded Argonauts”, soldiers of the colonisation forces, leave their footsteps on the wet soil, marking the civilisation that they have conquered. On this same barren landscape, this wasteland, the women of Colchis have shed their blood in the form of their “torn menstrual napkins”(p.127) invoking Medea’s first entrance in Euripides’ play when she addresses the women of Corinth and enlists their sympathy and support as members of the same sex who will understand her plight of “citylessness”, homelessness, and landlessness. Furthermore the symbolism of menstrual blood invokes a further stronger feminine bond, since women, unlike men, can bleed without dying. This “shared bleeding” therefore, far from disempowering the women functions as empowerment and a symbolic subversion of patriarchal society.

Meanwhile, the Argo waits in a hangar to crush Jason’s skull. The Argo is a symbol of Jason’s colonial conquest which according to the myth will become the vehicle of his ultimate

destruction. The image is a direct reference to the prophecy that the Euripidean Medea makes, as she is being carried away in the chariot of Helios. Jason will die Medea prophesies, not as a hero, but as he deserves “like any slave, / crushed by the falling timber / from [his] rotting ship the ‘Argo’”(Euripides, 1988, l.1387). In an interview on the sequence of his Medea pieces Müller explains that

[t]he end signifies the threshold where myth turns into history: Jason is slain by his boat ... European history began with colonisation ... That the vehicle of colonisation strikes the colonizer dead anticipates the end of it. That’s the threat of the end we’re facing, the ‘end of growth’ (Müller, 1984, p.124).

Müller’s idea is better understood if we hold it up against Loomba’s premise that “colonialism was the midwife that assisted at the birth of European capitalism, [and] that without colonial expansion the transition to capitalism would not have taken place in Europe”(1998 p.4). The Argo becomes a symbol of the coloniser’s weapon which ultimately, like the colonised that he seduced, turns against him.

On another level, Müller’s narrative becomes one which tells the history of European imperialism whose mythological beginnings take us back to ancient Colchis. But it also suggests that the same European imperialism, with which Europe dominated other nations all around the globe, was ultimately self-destructive since it created the very conditions that brought about its demise. Furthermore, it is a reflection of a different kind of imperialism which is more relevant to Müller’s reality, namely the imperialist expansion of particular European nations upon their close relatives. Thus Müller’s *Medea* adaptation also clearly alludes to the violent, tense relationship between eastern and western Germany after the arbitrary division of the nation following its defeat in the Second World War. As Muller himself argues, in different and varied ways the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s brought to the surface a fraught relationship between the so-called “authentic” West German identity and the identity of the “East German Other”. “Germany”, he writes, “is in the throes of an

identity crisis, though there never has been a national identity encompassing *one* Germany”(1993, p.16). To comprehend that better one has only to think of Fachinger’s assertion that while “the unified Germany has officially been a ‘post-colonial’ nation since it was granted full sovereignty by the occupying powers, German unification is often perceived as an act of Western colonization of the East”(2001, p.12). While, at the time that Muller wrote his *Medea* trilogy Soviet Communism was the colonising force in the GDR

Müller epitomises all these theoretical ideas in the short yet prophetic closing image of *Despoiled Shore*: Medea is shown in a final and contradictory image, “cradling The brother hacked up to pieces She expert / in poisons”(p.128). The image is shocking yet poetic, and the careful choice of diction highlights the inherent contradiction in Medea and everything that she represents. On the one hand there is reference to the myth which has her hack her own brother to pieces in order to assist Jason in his escape with the Golden Fleece from Colchis. Jason’s mission to seek and bring home the treasure from the Barbarians can be seen as the ultimate symbol of the imperial dream which lasted throughout the centuries to the present day: to go forth and conquer the so-called under civilised and bring home the treasures from their land. On the other hand she shows her tenderness by “cradling” the body of the brother that she herself had slain. This unusual association places her and her brother together as victims of imperialism, facing Jason as the appropriator of the cultural heritage of Colchis and therefore the imperialist coloniser. Medea has served Jason in his quest for power, fame and posterity, in other words she has succumbed to the attractions of the culture of the coloniser and has betrayed her own native culture. When he disposes of her, showing disrespect and indifference she turns her expertise in poisons against him, just like mother earth turns against her inhabitants (thus the “despoiled shore”), just like the colonised turns against the coloniser. The image alludes to the inherent guilt of the colonised who has at some point been seduced

by the coloniser's culture and has betrayed her own; the subsequent realisation of this betrayal may turn the colonised subject forcefully against the coloniser.

The centrepiece of the play, *Medeamaterial*, is a more direct reflection on aspects of and events from Euripides' play, placing them within the social and political reality of the GDR. It opens with Medea proclaiming Jason to be her first and last love. Yet in her two dialogues with him, which encase her central monologue, she shows herself to be aware of the present situation and prepared to accept it, but not without making Jason pay a price. Medea takes her revenge not only by denying Jason his status as a father by killing his male offspring, but also – and perhaps more significantly – by reasserting her self and her identity and by nullifying his very existence when at the end of the piece she refuses to recognize him. By not naming him she negates his existence because, after all, life lies in remembering. She refuses to be his reflective Other and so Jason ceases to exist:

Jason: Medea.

Medea: Nurse Do you know this man (p.133)

Throughout this section of the play the theme of identity is recurrent. Medea indicates that she is well aware of the fact that she doesn't belong, when she says that she is at the mercy of King Creon, who "can grant [her] the right to live in Corinth or drive [her] out to other foreign shores"(p.128). She asks the Nurse to bring her a mirror, and upon looking into it proclaims, "This is not Medea". Her rejection of her own reflection in the mirror as an image of her true self is a confirmation of the fact that she has no identity; she is a non-entity in this land. Conversely, when Jason tries to undermine her by implying that she was nothing before he brought her to civilization, and asks her "What were you before I came woman", she replies "Medea"(p.129). Therefore, before being conquered by the coloniser Jason, Medea did have an identity, which the forces of capitalist, imperialist society, as represented by Jason, have nullified.



The repeated reference to death and birth and to human life as a commodity further resonates the anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist symbolism of Müller's narrative: Medea voices a most harshly vivid plea to Jason, not once, not twice, but three times in a relatively short speech: "You owe me a brother Jason... You still owe me a brother Jason... You still owe me a brother Jason"! To which Jason readily replies "Two sons I gave you for one brother". This dialogue is a direct criticism of the way contemporary capitalist society assigns value arbitrarily even on human lives deciding to equate two sons to one brother.

Medea's monologue follows. Its first few lines are most striking in highlighting this theme of human life as a war-time commodity, whether it be a personal war, a political war, or a "war" between civilisations:

You Me Do you love them Jason your sons  
Do you then want them back your sons  
They're yours What can be mine being your slave  
All of me is your tool and all things from me  
For you I killed for you I did give birth  
I've been your bitch your whore is what I was  
I but a rung in your ladder of fame...  
And my brother oh my brother Jason...  
You'd robbed his father and mine Do you love  
Your sons You want to have them back your sons  
You still owe me a brother Jason (p.129)

There is a polarity in the relationship of these two people brought forward by the repeated use of the words "you", "me", "yours", "mine". Medea is desperate to understand how she, who was a powerful, almost superhuman sorceress who freely and so easily took away and gave the gift of life, was only an object, a rung in Jason's ladder of fame. However, once she has managed to regain her strength and her identity she is able once again to give her "gift" to Jason in the form of the debt that has to be collected:

Today is payday Jason Your Medea  
Will collect her debts today  
Can you laugh now Death is but a present  
And from my hands you shall receive the gift (p.132)

Müller's Medea emerges triumphant from her struggle to accept the past and to look her present and her future in the eye. She relives the horror of the slaying of her own people, the destruction of her own land and manages to come to terms with that reality through accepting Jason's betrayal. She even thanks him for it. Her love for him, her desire to be part of the dominant culture and whatever that stood for had previously blinded her to the atrocities that had been committed. Her ears were deafened to the screams of the people tortured in Colchis before she left with Jason and the Golden Fleece, having betrayed her homeland and her identity. Now she can hear the screams, she can see the atrocities, she "owns" them, and that liberates her:

...Thanks for your treason  
That gives me back both of my eyes again  
To see what I saw once the images  
You've painted with the boots of your crew Jason  
Unto my Colchis ears to hear again  
The music you once played upon the corpses  
The bones the graves of those who were my people (p.130)

Accepting her past frees her opening her eyes to the future that will be gained through the death of her children who are the results of her "infiltration" by the coloniser; they are "the fruits of treason that grew from [his] seed"(p.130) and she asks him to do the impossible: "take Jason what you gave me...And stuff it into your whore's eager womb"(p.131). She calls her own children actors who are "nothing but liars and traitors"(p132) and asks them to give her back her blood out of her veins and return to her womb. The fact that she decides to kill them proves her acceptance of the irreversibility of history, and of her shame for her own treason.

The final piece of Müller's "synthetic fragment", *Landscapes with Argonauts*, fuses the myth of Jason as a coloniser, with the horrific reality of the contemporary world. The result is an even more terrifying future. Here the dramatist paints a bleak picture of the world in which the "I", presumably in the voice of Jason, seems to be thrown around as in a

whirlwind. It is of course, as Müller himself points out in an introductory comment to the play, a collective “I” that is speaking and struggling to comprehend the traumas of mankind – from antiquity to the modern day.

The text is full of allusions, complex yet powerful and beautiful images, scattered, seemingly unconnected memories, and a dreamlike quality. It is a poetic composition which challenges the reader’s imagination and knowledge of history. The future of mankind is painted in the dark colours of uncertainty: “Thin between the I and the No more I ... FUTURE in rusty armour travels along”(pp.133-4). This ambivalence of existence is connected to Medea’s own non-gendered existence “between the empty middle” of mankind.

Medea previously denied Jason his identity, stripped him of his identity as a father, and as a man. Now Müller has him wonder in the landscape of despair agonizingly searching for himself, trying to define his existence:

Shall I speak of me I who  
Of whom are they speaking when  
They do speak of me I Who is it  
In the rain of bird droppings In the hide of lime  
Or else I a banner a  
Bloody rag hung out A fluttering  
‘Tween nothing and no one provided there is wind  
I scum of a man I scum of  
A woman ... I my death (p.133)

Just like Medea before him, this character is on an agonising search of a non-gendered identity which he ultimately finds in his death. He has an anchor for an umbilical cord which ties him to the horizon of memory yet his voyage in this memory dream is destroyed, it has no point of arrival. “DO YOU REMEMBER DO YOU NO I DON’T”, he asks himself and answers his own question, as he travels in the landscape of catastrophe which he observes. Contrary to Medea who regains her identity through memory, the persona in *Landscapes with Argonauts* seeks salvation in remembering but does not manage to redeem himself through cultural memory – and therefore defines himself only as the landscape of his own death.

Throughout *Landscape with Argonauts*, Müller seems to convey a sense of an imminent catastrophic invasion of the technological on modern civilization, as well as a belief that a change in attitudes, and perhaps of consciousness itself, is the only thing standing in the way of complete destruction. He sees this change as possibly occurring through the dramatic medium because he believes that the theatre's function at a crisis point in history is to represent new alternatives to such attitudes. To use his own words once again, *Landscapes with Argonauts* "presumes the catastrophes which mankind is working toward. The theatre's contribution to their prevention can only be their representation"(p. 126).

One very obvious challenge that Müller's remaking of the Medea myth does present is related to its staging. It is a theatre text which challenges any director and actors involved in bringing it into production, because the text seems to have been written to resist production or, if seen in a more creative light, to invite interpretation. Indeed it must have been the playwright's intention to compose such a text since he has declared that "only if a text cannot be done to suit the theatre in its present state, is it likely to be productive for the theatre, and interesting"(cited in Wright, 1989, p.128). Either way it is significant to remember that Müller wanted his texts to be experienced by the audience, "taken in somehow" and not necessarily "understood"(Müller, 1995, p.viii). According to Theodoros Terzopoulos, director of numerous plays by Müller, the key to approaching his plays is to be historically aware, politically engaged, ideologically charged, socially experienced and immensely talented (Personal Interview with director, 26.05.09). Whichever way one chooses to approach his work one thing is certain: in defying thematic certainty and leaving the interpretative decisions in the hands of the theatre practitioners and their audiences, Müller's dramaturgy makes every production an act of appropriation. For however carefully one looks at Müller's plays for "keys" as to how they should be staged, one is still left with an alarming degree of freedom for that staging. Therefore each theatre practitioner who decides to produce one of

Müller's plays is clearly re-making it, using his or her own "historical awareness", "political engagement" or "ideology".

In a May 2009 production by Greek director Nikos Sakalidis and the Aktis Aeliou Art Theatre Company in Athens, director and actors collaborated to stage a politically informed performance with Artaudian and Brechtian influences, which successfully addresses the multiple complexity of Müller's *Medea* sequence.

This performance displays its obvious connections to Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty" where the director, actor and spectator all make theatre together, and emphatic focus is placed on the human body as a theme but also as a tool for aesthetic expression. The theatre that Artaud envisages is one that would awaken, organise and present the latent dream images of our mind, gripping us with its power and amazing us with its spectacular presentation. This theatre, Artaud writes, "is a powerful appeal through illustration to those powers which return the mind to the origins of its inner struggles ... it arouses deep echoes within us and predominates over our unsettled period"(1993, pp.20 & 64). In a performance which adopts this theoretical approach "the spectator will be shaken and set on edge by the internal dynamism of the spectacle"(Innes, 1993, p. 65). Through stimulation of the physical and emotional senses, the audience is to be maintained in a constant state of uncertainty leading to overwhelming emotional release. This Aktis Aeliou production does just that.

This is the third and final version of a performance in progress, generated through a series of workshops aimed at reflecting the openness and multi-dimensionality of Müller's text. According to the director, this performance is "an attempt to illuminate aspects of a work which is dense, mature, entirely contemporary, intensely relevant and wholly dark and obscure, like the age we live in"(Performance Programme, 'Heiner Müller's the Trilogy of Medea', translation mine). Thus in an Artaudian fashion the audience participates in an immersion on the multiple levels of meaning which are present. The spectator embarks on a

journey of discovery in a production which does not function as a defined, static system but as a fertile and ever evolving variable. Inspired by the raw quality of Müller's writing Sakalidis directs a performance which is informed by dramatic tension and intense theatricality.

Sakalidis brings Müller's view of history and political reality to life and reaches the sensibility of each spectator with whom the actors try to maintain direct eye contact throughout the performance in a particularly Artaudian fashion, thus making them feel as if they themselves are seeking to define their identity like Medea "within the empty middle of mankind". In this theatre event, one gets a sense of one's own reality being threatened which in the playwright's own words is theatre's "most important political function, free of any ideological bias"(Müller, 1995, p.xx).

The audience walks into the theatre to face a dark set, in keeping with the dark view of reality that the play reflects. The core of the production focuses on the theme of alienation, human degradation, and loss of identity in the world it depicts. To that effect in this performance there are three Medeas, two nurses and two Jasons present on stage that alternate their speeches randomly further blurring the distinction among them. This multiplicity of faces acting the same character prevents easy actor identification, which consequently forces the audience to look more closely at the mechanism of acting and results in their continued attentiveness and awareness of the non-representational nature of the spectacle they are watching.

The director chooses to open the play with a choral extract from Euripides. The purpose of this and another three choral extracts included in the play is, according to Sakalidis, to elucidate the play's narrative structures and obscure density, and to determine its relation to its most obvious source text (Performance Programme). However, while these choral extracts serve to contextualise, they certainly do not make the text any clearer since the excerpts are delivered in ancient Greek which is equally, if not more obscure, to a modern

Greek audience. It would seem that this intentional obscurantism serves, rather, to interrogate and question the “clarity” of the moral position of the original Greek chorus.

The first choral extract is followed by the appearance on stage of a male actor, who will later be one of the two Jasons, speaking as Müller about this theatre text and some of his reasoning behind the writing of it. Later in the performance, the persona of the playwright will appear again, to speak a short text which is included as a preface to the published version of the play. This choice of the director is exceptionally interesting since it suggests that the performance is not only a dramatisation of Müller’s text, but also of its hermeneutic frame, in other words the theory behind it as suggested both by the playwright, and those who study and stage his work.

After Jason/Müller’s speech, the audience view a silent staging of *Medeaplay* which begins with an intensely physical, long-drawn bodily combat between the two Jasons who seem to be acting out one person’s struggle of identity, a desperate attempt at self-definition as well as an effort to position himself within the centre of his world as a sole victor and survivor. The scene is strewn with the debris of any modern city. One of the Medeas is led onto the stage by the other two, tied to a red table which serves as a bed, and is raped by both Jasons in turn. She produces a baby which she dismembers and hurls at them, after the other Medeas untie her from the bed.



Fig. 1.1 *Medeaplay*: Medea rises from the bed on which she was tied

At the beginning of *Despoiled Shore*, which follows *Medeaplay*, there is one female figure on stage in the attire of a prostitute, and the two Jasons who speak of the polluted landscape of contemporary civilisation. The lighting and colours change from red and warm to black, gray and cold. Humanity is shown at its worse. The end of the scene finds all the actors on stage: the prostitute, the Nurse, the three Medeas and the two Jasons. One Medea holds up a mirror to the two Jasons. They do not appear to see themselves. One of them is dressed in a suit with a blood-stained bandage around his forehead, suggesting the bloody mission of the coloniser. The other Jason sits in a wheelchair, evoking the disabling effect contemporary industrialised, over-consuming society has on an individual's existence. However, the most obvious comment is gender-related since this disabled Jason is wearing a long purple velvet dress. On the one hand this symbolises his lack of contact with a more feminine side of himself, since he is the typical male, patriarchal figure; on the other it also resonates Medea's words when she says:

I want to break mankind apart in two  
And live between the empty middle I  
No woman and no man (p.132)



Müller's Medea is a woman who re-defines herself as negation. She wants to tear apart the foundation of our civilisation and the structures which have informed it, in an attempt to rediscover her self in the empty space between genders and cultures. She is neither a woman nor a man, she is neither a “barbarian” nor a member of “civilised” society; she seeks to define herself within this void and manages to do so in the end. The disabled Jason in his purple dress however, does not manage to assert a meaningful identity. Medea's radical act of infanticide traps him in a genderless, incapacitated existence out of which there is no way and so she, the subaltern Other triumphs over him, the imperial coloniser.



Fig. 1.2 Multiple identities

In *Medeamaterial* the three Medeas dominate the scene and mirrors are used extensively to play with the idea of multiple identity. Sakalidis' use of mirrors echoes with Lacan's theory of “the mirror stage” (1977) which involves the moment during which the human being first recognizes him/herself as Self, as Other or possibly even as others see him/her, in the mirror. Taken a step further, the theory casts doubt on any attempt to establish one single, meaningful, authentic identity. Identity, for Lacan, is always an alienating Other and the

process of identifying even with the image of our own body in the mirror establishes an alienated, divided subjective life. Thus when all of the three Medeas, at some point in the performance hold up a mirror in front of Jason they are inviting him and also challenging him to establish a meaningful identity. His apparent inability to see himself or to identify with what he does see proves all identifications, including those of gender and race, to be false and meaningless. Medea on the other hand, does establish her identity but not by looking at her reflection in the mirror. She becomes Medea again by uprooting, like a true revolutionary, any traces of the coloniser from within her, and through the harmonious union with the other Medeas on stage which are all different expressions of the same person.

In this piece there is only one silent Jason, leaning on the wall at the far side of the stage, smoking a cigarette throughout Medea's monologue. The three actresses take turns in speaking parts of the monologue, in what seems like a random manner but some of the most powerful lines of the text are spoken by all three Medeas in chorus.



Fig. 1.3 Three Medeas, one Jason

One such speech is at the end of *Medeamaterial* when Medea asserts her identity and, while two of the women hold the docile Jason down on the same table where Medea had previously

been raped in *Medeaplay*, she places her foot on his head assuming the typical position of a conquering soldier. All three together say “O I am wise I am Medea I”(p.133). The roles are reversed and the conquered becomes the conqueror.

In *Landscapes with Argonauts* the voice is given to the two Jasons who manage to convey a visual image of the despairing cry of a man in search of himself in a physically and morally desolate world, bereft of human values. This is a world where “The youth of today [are] ghosts of / The dead of the war that is to happen tomorrow”(p.134). It is a world in which our everyday life is polluted by filth that the media bombard us with and which Müller describes in a dense metaphor as the “tube vomit[ing] world into the livingroom”(p.134). In a final “tableau”, after the two Jasons have spoken their part, they become their own destructive force: using a replica of a gun, made of a few pieces of scrap wood, one of them points it to the other’s face and the latter holds his arms back in a gesture of surrender. The feeling that is evoked in the audience is one of unresolved helplessness in the face of the self-destructive nature of mankind as Müller wishes to represent it.



Fig 1.4 The self-destructive nature of mankind

In this production, Müller's use of ellipsis, textual deconstruction and simultaneous density are interpreted in a way which addresses the question "What is civilisation?" and the binary opposition between the personal and the collective. Just like the text itself, this performance does not offer any ready answers; but it does clearly suggest that what is personal lies within what is political and that in turn lies in what is historical. True to Nick Kaye's definition (or non-definition) of postmodern theatre, this is a performance which is "'wilfully' unconventional and 'experimental', acting, in one way or another to upset or challenge the idea of what...drama is" (1994, p.3).

Müller adapts the myth of Medea and Sakalidis stages his adaptation, not to show a woman who commits murder blinded with "lust and jealousy"(Euripides, 1988, l.1336), but a "no woman and no man" who seeks his or her identity within what is history, within what is political, within what is now. Medea's act of infanticide is transformed from a personal act of revenge into a political act of self assertion and defiance against the system.

## NOTES

1. Müller, H. (1984) *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscapes with Argonauts*. trans. Carl Weber, in Weber, C. (ed.) *Hamletmachine and other texts for the stage*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications. All subsequent references to the play will appear in brackets after the citation.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### MEDEA, A TEMBU PRINCESS IN SOUTH AFRICA

The scene opens early one morning, on a theatrical set which looks destroyed and deserted: “Boxes are packed, mats unfolded, tents removed, until there is nothing left but an impression of emptiness and heat.” Amidst this scene of desolation, a woman triumphantly declares, “We have won! They thought to shape the world their way but I have shaped it mine!” (Butler, 1990, p.75).<sup>1</sup> These could be the words of any woman who has overthrown her oppressors, who has defeated her enemies, who has won a battle of wills.

They are, in fact, the words of Demea, the black Tembu princess, and central character of Guy Butler’s homonymous South African adaptation of the Euripidean *Medea*, at the opening of her scene of victory. Demea has rediscovered the self she had lost to her white husband Jonas and the colonial society he represents. In a highly charged symbolic gesture of self assertion and power, she sheds the European clothes she had been wearing, which she now calls her “slave’s clothes”, and dresses herself ceremoniously and triumphantly in her African garments. She has indeed, taken the fate of her children, their father and a whole group of white trekkers into her hands; she has shaped the world in her own, African way and reclaimed her identity.

Guy Butler, South African poet, playwright, historian, and academic, wrote *Demea* in the early 1960s when the laws of the apartheid were being formalised and implemented. These laws, to use Butler’s own words, “all depended on the biological accident of race” (1990, *Author’s Note*, np) and were put into effect based on the recognition of “pure” races, namely the black and the white. This separation of the races was, in the playwright’s view, most injurious to those who did not have a “pure” racial background, and more particularly South Africa’s “coloured” population which was a “mixture” of black and white. It is *their* plight which he is eager to emphasise in his adaptation of Euripides’ *Medea* but also the plight



of all those who do not belong, who are considered misfits and outsiders. It is therefore not surprising that he too chooses to adapt Euripides' quintessential tragedy of alterity in order to develop a political allegory which illustrates the injustices and dangers inherent in the colonial experience.

Butler writes that in the late 1950s he "came under the sway of the Greek dramatists...[and] was particularly struck by the *Medea* of Euripides which dealt with an issue much on [his] mind; racial and cultural prejudice" (1990, *Author's note*, np). Understandably these are his foremost concerns at the end of the 1950s, since this is the time when the grip of the apartheid on South Africa grew tighter. Remarkably *Demea* must have lain on Butler's desk for almost thirty years, since it could not be staged in the South Africa whose laws and apartheid system it protests against and seeks to subvert and demolish. It is a play which speaks of interracial relationships, explores racial and cultural prejudice and requires a multiracial cast, in a country where citizens were prohibited by law – the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1948 – to marry a person of a different race. Another law, the Immorality Act of 1950, proclaimed it a criminal act even to display intent or interest in conducting a relationship with a member of a different race.(Lapping, 1987)

In 1990, when the system was beginning to break down and apartheid began to loosen its hold on the theatre, the time became ripe for the staging of *Demea*. It was first performed in July of the same year at the National Festival of the Arts in Grahamstown, South Africa and to my knowledge there is no record of a performance ever since.

While the play is set in 1828 and there is a thirty year gap between its writing in 1960, and its performance in 1990, Butler has incorporated elements which ensure its functions on a multiplicity of historical, social and political levels. Thus it is performed not as a "dated" play whose concerns relate to decades or centuries past, but as a play which is highly relevant and whose issues are pressing at the time of its performance. And while, as I will outline in the

course of this chapter, the action is placed simultaneously in 1828, 1960 and 1990, Butler also incorporates the myth of Medea and the Argonauts to make reference to his source text.

In this dramaturgical practice of setting the plot in distinctly different historical moments, we can clearly see the Brechtian influence according to which the “desired” effect of the theatre is to historicise the incidents it portrays and ultimately to insure a political reading or viewing. This historically intertextual framework contributes to defining the play in historically relevant terms and simultaneously ensures the audience’s increased awareness of the theatricality of the action, and arouses their desire to alter it, thus also achieving Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*.

On one level, therefore, *Demea* is an adaptation of *Medea* since it uses the basic plot elements of Euripides’ tragedy with the main characters’ names being recognisably modelled on their Euripidean prototypes and bearing directly to the source text: Creon has become Kroon; Demea and Jonas are both anagrams of the ancient characters while Demea’s name is also the Greek word for female executioner. There is Kantoni, Demea’s Tembu maid who together with Aia takes on the traditional Nurse’s role and Agaam, childless chief of the Baharutsi (a local tribe), who functions on one level as Aegeus, the childless king of Athens, that provides Medea with refuge, but who here holds a far more instrumental and symbolic role.

On the other hand, *Demea* is no slavish imitation of Euripides’ text; it is a powerful play in its own right in which Euripides’ plot has been expanded to reflect the complexities of the South African situation. It is a play which can be read in the light of post-colonial theory which attributes politically motivated, historical-analytical elements to a text, aiming to subvert the effects of colonialism, and critique political structures. According to Gilbert and Tomkins post-colonial theatre encompasses the specifically political aim of destabilising the political and cultural authority of imperialism. This play certainly does that on multiple levels:

it critiques imperialist attitudes of the British in Africa in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it clearly seeks to show the hollowness of Boer separatist attitudes of the same historical period and certainly subverts – though slightly less directly – apartheid at its height in the 1960s and in its waning days in the 1990s. It is indeed a play which is engaged with contesting “colonialism’s discourses, power structures, and social hierarchies”(1996, p.2).

“In writing *Demea*,” Butler reveals, “I have turned the *Medea* into a political allegory of the South African situation as I saw it, at the height of the idealistic Verwoerdian mania. We are still being forced [at the time of its first performance in 1990] to live under some of those laws, and many of our ongoing agonies are still related to them” (Author’s note, np). By setting the main action of *Demea* in 1828 Butler elucidates the beginnings and the solidification of South African racial thinking. In a clever chronological reversal he invents a nineteenth century “trek” run on the principles of Hendrik Frensch Verwoerd who is considered to be the primary architect of the official policy of apartheid and who remained Prime Minister in South Africa between 1958 and 1966 when he was assassinated. The trek’s leader, Johannes Christiaan Kroon, clearly articulates this ideology of apartheid and in this way deconstructs the validating myth of Afrikaner identity which the Nationalist party used as propaganda material.

The main plot of *Demea* unfolds in the frontier region of the Eastern Cape between 1828 and 1830, the period which lead up to the Great Trek of 1834. This was a key event in South African history, when many Boer farmers, or *voortrekkers* as they were called, motivated by their racial prejudice, their fear of losing their Dutch cultural heritage and language, and their desire to escape British rule, decided to relocate to the interior so they could govern themselves and form their own “racially pure” societies (Lapping, 1987, Mezzabotta, 2000). Unnamed character A says of these Boers in the opening scene of the play:

They wanted a home where they could do what they liked,  
With no interference from the British,  
Where there would be places for all the different blacks,  
And every black kept in his proper place.  
For themselves they only wanted a small pure-white state (pp. 2-3).

However, the play does not open in the early nineteenth century but is set instead in the present day – both the time of its composition and the time of its performance. The first scene opens “*on a harshly lit bare piece of arid veld*”(p.1) with three unnamed characters on stage, A, B and C. “*Two are Africans*” Butler says in his stage directions, “*and one a so-called coloured man. All are in contemporary working clothes*”(p.1). These unnamed characters unravel in a few words the history of South Africa’s colonisation but also refer to its political reality and simultaneously offer a setting for the *Medea* narrative which will follow. Their excited voices begin the play:

A: Something has got to happen, sometime, somewhere  
B: Something is happening now...everywhere  
C: Something has happened already, here (p.1).

These are the voices of South Africans in 1990, sensing that change is necessary but also imminent and eagerly looking to a better future; they are the voices of the black actors and black members of the audience who until recently would have been banned from participating at such an event; and this is also the voice of the playwright who has been given the freedom to speak through this performance, after thirty years of silence.

The spirit in Grahamstown in July 1990 was one of hope. Though the ratio of black and whites attending the festival was still outbalanced, dialogue had begun and something was indeed happening. Reporter Andrew Harris writes in *The Independent*, “Although it was not a particularly balanced one, there was a genuine mix of culture. And in a country where the gaps between different cultural groups are colossal, the festival has the potential to bring people together in a way that it is only just now beginning to realise”(Harris, 1990).

All the actors playing a character in the play move onto the stage and walk away again in silence. As they do so A, B, and C comment on their situation which links their socio-historical reality to contemporary South Africa. When the Medea and Jason figures walk on stage, B says “today they can marry whom they like, but must break the law if they want to live together”(p.3), alluding directly to apartheid legislation and more specifically to the Immorality Act of 1957. They also name the Group Areas Act of 1950, a much hated law that forced physical separation between races by creating different residential areas for different racial groups. They clearly hint at the hope of its repeal which did indeed occur a few months later, in June 1991.

In the first of several gestures related to clothing as a powerful visual symbol, A, B, and C remove their contemporary clothes during their last speech and appear dressed in the nineteenth century costumes of three characters of the play: Agaas, Chief of the Baharutsi tribe, Matiwane, Chief of the Amabena tribe and Cobus, coloured runaway slave and wagon driver. All three are instrumental in bringing about the destruction of Kroon’s all-white group of *voortrekkers* at the end of the play, which also coincides with the killing of Demea’s two sons and her liberation from the colonial influences of her past.

If we de-construct and analyse this theatrical moment we see the actors defamiliarising the audience in the Brechtian sense of the term by drawing attention to themselves as actors playing roles, while also alerting them to the historical relevance of the moment. On the level of symbolic signification, we see the native peoples of South Africa stepping into the roles of their ancestors in order to re-live and comprehend their history and consequently symbolically liberate their country from its suffering under colonial rule.

Overall *Demea* focuses primarily on the socio-political dilemmas of the characters and not on the jealousy driven vengeance of the Medea figure. It deals less with the issue of gender which is central in Euripides and in numerous other adaptations of his play, and

focuses more on the issues of race, identity, and prejudice. Captain Jonas Barker, the Jason figure, is a British soldier who came to Southern Africa after fighting in the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) and stayed on to become a trader and travelling merchant. Demea, his common-law wife of fifteen years, is a Tembu princess, whose skill in native medicines and knowledge of the African tribes and their ways provides Jonas with trading access to remote villages, which would otherwise have been inaccessible. Jonas leads a “mixed race” trek which symbolises an ideal society where people of different racial backgrounds peacefully coexist and prosper. Fitzwilliam, the white tutor of Demea’s and Jonas’s sons takes pride in belonging to such a “vanguard” trek and points out that “[t]he mind and the heart of man are too strong to accept the skin as a prison”(p.14).

However this idealistic situation was about to cease – as was true of any peaceful co-existence that existed until the end of the nineteenth century in the southern part of Africa. Jonas becomes increasingly attracted to the economic advantages and social status offered to him through allegiance with another trek assembling to move north at the same time as his. It is a purely white trek under the leadership of a white Boer, Kroon. Kroon is the embodiment of Boer thinking which was the foundation of racial and separationist attitudes in South Africa of the twentieth century. His vision includes conversion of the black pagans to Christianity, rejection of the racially lax British policies and the creation of “a state for white people only, who will not be spoilt or bastardised as we are now”(p.11). Later in the play Demea seems to be prophesying when she says: “Your white vision is our nightmare; but its pain may breed a vision in us that will be a nightmare to you”(p 37). Kroon’s attitudes reflect the attitudes not only of the Boers of Dutch descent, but also of the white ruling class of the 1950s and 1960s when the play was written. Indeed Kroon’s words are even more shocking to hear if we bear in mind the Second World War which had just ended and whose consequences were still traumatically felt. “I myself am of pure Germanic descent,” says Kroon to Jason, “[and] the

parents of my wife are from the province of Friesland in Holland. What mixture there is, is within the Nordic family”(p.12). Needless to say that Kroon’s daughter is pale and blond, a “golden girl” to whom Jonas decides to get married in order to purify himself and produce racially pure offspring.

Their marriage assumes symbolic significance as it coincides with the inauguration of Kroon’s new state and the complicit alliance of white English speaking South Africans (Jonas) and the Boers as architects of apartheid (Kroon). Therefore Jonas’s marriage, together with his desertion of his own mixed community and more specifically of his black wife and their two “coloured” children can be seen as presenting the betrayal by the English of black and “coloured” South Africans. There’s irony of course in his decision and the direction he follows, since he is betraying his own self, by leaving his sons, *and* the beliefs that he previously held. Fitzwilliam remembers telling Jonas when he first married Demea, “Captain, she is beautiful and intelligent, but white society won’t accept her.” Jonas had replied without hesitation, “But we are in Africa, she is African. Sooner or later all African peoples must come together. Isn’t that common sense?”(p.14). But fifteen years later Jonas’s ideal vision of the natural inevitability of the mingling of races in Africa has been lost. As for the 1990 audience at Grahamstown, they must have certainly heard the irony here: over 150 years later and that “sooner or later” had still not arrived.

In scene 1 of the play the Van Niekerks, a white couple from Kroon’s group, come to Jonas’ trek in desperation, seeking to be accepted as members. In Mrs Van Neikerk’s own words, they “have passed as white for three generations,” but have now been shunned from their group because she gave birth to a child with darker skin. They ask for succour in a trek where “colour matters little” and feeling “lost, deserted by man and God”(p.19) they even offer to hand the child over *and* give a hundred cattle in return for the favour. It is under these circumstances that Jonas is forced to reveal his change of heart and confirm his plan to leave

behind him everything that he stood for. "The fact is," he declares, "I no longer believe in a mixed trek"(p.23). "I can honestly say I have no colour feeling myself; but after fifteen years I have given up. One man can't fight the prejudices of a continent"(p.25).

The Van Niekerks cannot be sympathetic to the audience, despite their plight, precisely because they reflect an attitude that the audience would be well aware of: the "ruling class obsession with skin pigmentation [which] was seeping everywhere into the education system, social life, the media, the courts, the theatre" in the late 1950s and the early 1960s (Orkin, 1990, pp.82-3). The Van Niekerks are so steeped in their own notions of white racial supremacy that they can barely feel the blood bond with their own child. Even before Jonas rejects them they hesitate over whether they would "stoop low enough" to join a group of mixed race people. "You know what your blood is now, that your skin is a lie. Life is in the blood, not the skin," Demea points out to them, "Which will you choose?"(Butler, 1996, p.22)

This is surely a dilemma which reaches out to a contemporary South African audience and Butler invites them to participate in this dilemma by using an interesting dramaturgical device which also produces a *Verfremdungseffekt*. The playwright stops the action and removes the characters from their previously assigned roles by giving them one collective role to play. He transforms Van Niekerk, his wife and Fitzwilliam into a "chorus". They come forward on the stage and address the audience, asking them to engage critically in the highly debatable issues and the conflicts which have been unfolding on stage:

VAN NIEKERK: Who would have thought it?

MRS VAN NIEKERK: You can see for yourselves how light-skinned I am.

VAN NIEKERK: But one or both of us has the blood of a slave or a Hottentot in our veins.

FITZWILLIAM: You old serfs, you exiled Malays, you Mozambiquan slaves, where are you now? A long conspiracy of silence seemed to have wiped you out; but now suddenly, uninvited, you return

VAN NIEKERK: Until the third and the fourth generation

MRS VAN NIEKERK: And always upon the children (p.20).



Butler uses the technique of defamiliarisation both to achieve the critical participation of the audience and to address a broader cultural issue. Our identity, the chorus implies, lies in our culture; whether we choose to acknowledge it or suppress it, our past will always be there to identify us. There is an obvious connection here to Freud's concept of "the return of the repressed" (1963 [1917]) whereby repressed elements, preserved in the unconscious, are essentially "indestructible" and tend to surface in consciousness or in behaviour "suddenly" and "uninvited", just like the "black blood" of the Van Niekerks. This connection effectively demolishes the myth of "pure" racial background or "pure" blood since it implies that one's past cannot be wiped out, hidden or repressed. It simply needs to be accepted as part of one's cultural identity.

Acknowledgement of this truth along with acceptance of a past that ought to make an individual proud and not ashamed of him or herself is emphatically underscored in the next scene where a group of different characters becomes the chorus who will draw the audience into the theatrical process and engage them into *Demea's* social and political dialogue. After Van Niekerk and his wife have been rejected by both Jonas and Kroon, they exit the stage and Kroon and Jonas remain onstage, silent. Four of the black members of the cast come forward and whisper to the audience:

KLEINBOY: This is a hard case [Kroon] said.

CAROLLUS: And hard cases make bad law.

KANTONI: The good law is the law

That keeps the white race pure.

CAROLLUS: That is the law he holds in his right whip-hand.

COBUS: To hell with him and his law!

AIA: I want a land where a girl does not dread

That her labour pains will bring her to shame –

A babe with the wrong sort of hair on his head.

CAROLLUS: I want a land where no father abandons his child

Because his great forgotten grandfather

Was a mahogany slave.

COBUS: We want, we will fight for a land

Where thickness of lips and colour of skin

Are not the same as original sin (pp. 26-7).

Their words clearly articulate the dream and hope of all the non-whites of South Africa to the whites who remain silent on stage and in the audience. It is an invitation in 1830 and in 1960 but also, and perhaps more importantly, in 1990 to the whites who had stood silently watching history unfold itself, to accept, defend and even seek to fulfil the black vision of South Africa. It is also a moment in the play which clearly legitimises black leadership in the country.

Yet why is this dream of the colonial subject voiced in a whisper? Could Butler be implying that the voice of the subaltern is not “loud enough” yet? Could the law that the coloniser holds in his “whip-hand” still be too powerful for the colonised subject to subvert it? Or is this whisper a suggestion that the forces of the imperial enterprise are still at play and silencing is evidence of the continuing hegemonic powers?

In a third encounter between a different chorus and the audience, Butler suggests that the answer might lie in more violent or radical acts. Demea has been told by Kroon that Jonas is to marry his daughter, that she, as “a pure bred Tembu” will have to return to her tribe and that her children, being of “mixed blood” will be taken in by the “Griquas”, a racially and culturally mixed group of people who originated in the intermarriages or sexual relations between European colonists in the Cape. This time the chorus is made up of Fitzwilliam and all the black members of the cast, including Demea:

CAROLLUS: White? A pure white state?

White is the colour of leprosy

FITZWILLIAM: Wherever I have wandered I have seen,

And I will see again,

White men proud of their whiteness

Fall as snowflakes fall

Into the warm black earth of Africa.

In a mere nine months

Their precious whiteness melts

Into as many shades as the seasons of the veld.

COBUS: And for this white lie the rest of us must suffer?

*Is it not better to kill off these dreamers*

*Before they fasten their nightmare upon our land?*

DEMEA: There must be a way; I hear a hint in the drums.

What shape it will take, who knows?  
But it comes, it comes (p. 39, my italics).

A black woman, two “coloured” men and a white man “not worried much about the colour of man’s skin”(p.3) all despair at the state that the Africa they love, know and belong to, finds herself in: under the rule of those who believe in the superiority of the white race and in the divinely inspired separatist state of apartheid. Cobus suggests that violence is the only solution, while Demea hears it in the tribal beating drums which can only signify conflict.

It is Demea who sparks that conflict in this play and her personal motives become distinctly political. As a true colonial subject, and a symbol of post-colonial survival she seeks to fight the colonisers and subvert their ideology. But she is also proof to the fact that in order to progress and leave behind the traumas of colonial imperialism, the colonised subject often needs to “uproot” things that are not just political or cultural, but also more personal and closer to her heart and which constituted a part of her existence – up to the moment of severing from the coloniser’s cultural hegemony. The process of severing implicates the complexities and ambiguities of many different cultural experiences, one of which is Demea’s bond with her children, which are also part of the coloniser’s power over her.

Examining Demea’s experience as a colonial subject reveals her motivation for liberation from the coloniser. We hear the story of how she met Jonas, from Fitzwilliam who made their acquaintance in 1916, twelve years before the action of the play begins. In his narration Fitzwilliam explores the clothes that Demea wore as symbols of her existence and her transition from Tembu princess, to colonised subject enchanted and seduced by the white man and his culture.

When Fitzwilliam first saw Demea “she wore her European clothes with an elegant insolence, as if her body knew its power and hated being hidden”(p.12). She had been educated at the white Mission Station after being “saved” by a missionary following the

violent death of her parents. A great uncle of hers, “perhaps the greatest magician of Tembuland” had reclaimed her as his own rightful property but she continued to spend most of her time at the Mission. There one day Captain Jonas Barker stopped on his way to Tembuland and was asked by the Missionary to take Demea with him back to her people because she was “too much trouble” and refused to be baptised. Jason agreed to take her back to her uncle’s village. “She came out of the Mission house in her tribal dress,” recalls her maid Kantoni, “to show she had finished with them. But the closer we got to her uncle’s kraal, the less she wore her tribal dress, and the more the white woman’s dress. Yes, the missionaries could not baptise her, but they had made her a stranger to her tribe”(p.13).

In a moment of shocking decisiveness Demea rejects her tribal identity and severs herself from her past and her culture in order to embrace the ideology of the coloniser. “She said a thing no African woman would say,” relates Kantoni, “she says ‘Captain keep me with you’”, and to her maid the next morning, “I am finished with these beads and skins. Put them away. Dressed in her mission clothes, she sat on the wagon watching the huts of her childhood slip over the hills; and the wagon went back to the white man’s world”(p.13). So Demea willingly rejects her own cultural identity after having been corrupted by the dominating culture. In her own words she caught the “disease” of the white world by glimpsing “a wonder of gentleness and care and respect for people”(p.61) which all turns out to be a lie. She realises in time that while she chose not to be Tembu, she cannot belong to the white world either. She lives “in the empty middle” between what she was and what she could never be. She inhabits the in-between of nothingness where she cannot define herself and therefore is disempowered as a citizen, as a woman, even as a mother. This makes her realisation of the fact and its significance even more painful when it does occur, when she realises that she too like other victims of colonial imperialism has been schooled, seduced, and then finally betrayed by Western ways. The only way to cure herself of this “cultural

disease” is through a radical act of self-assertion which will cleanse her and re-empower her. This cleansing process is a two-fold transformation. Initially it involves a symbolic “robing” not only of Demea but of all the main characters involved in the play. Subsequently she needs to uproot whatever traces of the coloniser remain inside her, the deepest of which are her children. Then she will be clean, strong and cured; ready to return to her world, ready to redefine herself.

The first person who “costumes” himself to enter a new world is Jonas. The “scarlet uniform of the dragoons”(p.10) which he wore when he fought for his King and country, and again when Demea first saw him, is now worn again for his wedding with Kroon’s daughter, his passage to the world of the Boers. When Rodney Parks offers to buy it off him now that Jonas will be moving “beyond his Majesty’s frontiers”, Jonas refuses straightforwardly: “I could no more part with my own skin”(p.45). His words hold a double signification. On the one hand he is prepared quite readily to part with his “own skin”, his two sons, simply because their skin is not the same colour as his. He is going to join a world where skin is prized above all else and neither he nor the people he is going to join, have learnt that one’s skin is a lie, and that “life is in the blood, not the skin”(p.22). On the other hand, unlike Demea the colonial subject, who was seduced by the hegemonic culture and readily gave up the clothes which marked her identity, Jonas will not part with his uniform which signifies the colonial empire and its social constructions as well as the role he plays in them.

On the dawn of his wedding everyone is “dressed” and has assumed their role. The bride is wearing her bridal gown and her father his Sunday suit; the boys are wearing clean new shorts; the tribal warriors their ceremonial feathers; in fact “the whole world has dressed itself up for this great occasion”(p.74). But what occasion is this? While it appears to be the occasion of Jonas’s wedding, it is actually the occasion of Demea’s liberation. And she more ceremoniously than all the rest divests herself of the garments of the white world which she

had been wearing all these years and dresses herself in her African robes, reclaiming her cultural identity. She calls for her “skins”, her “beads”, her “bronze bracelets” and her “turban”, willing its broken line to show how “the line of [her] neck is still unbroken!” Once again the sun is on her bare shoulders and “all fits well”(p.74). She is ready to break free, face the consequence of her actions and transform into the Tembu princess that she once was. When Fitzwilliam calls her a lynx and accuses her of deliberately planning the death of her two children, she calmly replies:

I, no. The woman who planned it was a woman who lived with a white man, wearing a white woman’s clothes; rotten because her own brown body knew his white body! But as you see I am not that Demea at all: I am calm, clothed as a black woman should be, and in my right mind (p.81).

Demea’s actions in this play are indeed those of a woman who is “right in her mind”. She does not act out of impulse, rage or a personal sense of injustice or even jealousy. Butler rewrites Medea into a Demea whose political actions and motivation clearly “seek to dismantle the hegemonic boundaries and the determinants that create unequal relations of power based on binary oppositions such as ‘us and them’, ‘first world and third world’, ‘white and black’, ‘coloniser and colonised’”(Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996, p.3) – thus making this play one with a specifically political post-colonial agenda.

In Euripides’ play Medea kills her children with her own two hands to take revenge upon Jason. In Butler’s adaptation Demea performs political manoeuvres which result in her sons being killed at the hand of Kroon. She sets a trap for Kroon and his trek while they are gathered for the wedding ceremony of Jonas and Kroon’s daughter. Her plan results in a bloody massacre. Every single member of Kroon’s trek, including his daughter and himself are killed by the black African tribes, who reclaim their land and their control over it.

This massacre can be understood better if it is seen in the light of Fiona Macintosh’s discussion of H.C. Lenormand’s 1931 adaptation of *Medea*, entitled *Asie* (2005).

Lenormand's play is, just like Butler's, a reworking of the Medea myth, which foregrounds the colonial experience by drawing attention to the debate over French colonial policy in Indochina. Macintosh compares the separation of the Medea figure from her husband to the moment of liberation from the coloniser, which invariably involves bloodshed. This is also certainly the case in *Demea*. In order to break free from her past and live in her own land as a woman who is aware and proud of who she is, Demea must break all the links with the white coloniser. This separation brings about bloodshed and includes foremost those closest to her heart, her children. She sends them to their death not because she is a "monster, murderess of children"(Euripides, 1955, l.1407), but because she does not want them to suffer like her, living "on the brink of the white world"(p.41). She does not want them to live without an identity, being neither black nor white; she wants to spare them the humiliation of racial prejudice. Her infanticide therefore, becomes a radical act of love and not of hot-blooded revenge.

Significantly, Demea's sons are not killed by the African warriors. Kroon himself "club[s] them to death with his own musket butt" once he realises that he has been betrayed. So they do not die at the hand of their mother – though she sends them to their deaths – or at the hand of any warrior of her race. Their life is taken away just as their spirit would have been killed if they had lived the life that was "dealt out" to them, by the hand of the white ruler.

Contrary to Euripides' *Medea*, *Demea* does not end with the protagonist escaping in the chariot of the Sun to a safe haven. She waits until Jonas returns from having witnessed the holocaust that she caused. When he does he is a broken man who meekly submits to being flogged by Cobus. Demea exits with regal dignity and the last words are spoken by Agaas to Jonas and every white member of the audience:

In Africa a man must know what is his own or become a cave full of echoes. You had nothing here of your own; you brought good habits and a head and hands that could move a trek of wagons and make a trading business work. But to the strange and the cruel, the high and the deep things, you were deaf (p.85).

The end of the play therefore holds a double signification. On the one hand the conflict between the black Africans, the English speaking South African population, and the Afrikaner apartheid regime has clearly left the country in a state of complete destruction. The final stage direction as the curtain falls reads, "*The stage is empty as though man has never been there. The sound of drums fades away. The light is intense and a cicada is screaming*"(p.85).

However, Demea, the colonial Other has shaped the world her way. By recognising and accepting her cultural identity she acquires a voice which is no longer a whisper. She can speak and be heard. Through her radical act of infanticide she raises the whisper to a cry of liberation and "free[s] up a space for the colonial subject to renegotiate an identity" (Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996, p.50), an identity which ultimately brings empowerment and possibly a solution to the problems of South Africa as Guy Butler saw them in 1990.



## NOTES

1. Guy Butler (1990). *Demea: a play*. Cape Town, David Philip. All subsequent references to the play will appear in brackets after the citation.

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## CHAPTER THREE

### MEDEA, A REFUGEE BACK HOME IN COLCHIS

The 1990s admittedly witnessed some of the most significant political events of the century occurring in or around Europe: the German reunification, the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent Yugoslav Wars, the breakup of the Soviet Union and the subsequent creation of new nations but also the outbreak of numerous ethnic conflicts. This was a time when all the fissures of history were shifting and cracking in Europe, and the conflicts which occurred displaced hundreds of thousands within the continent thus creating an acute refugee problem. Within this context playwright, academic, and critic Olga Taxidou wrote her own adaptation of Euripides' tragedy in 1997, entitled *Medea: A World Apart*. This re-making brings Medea as the subaltern Other to the forefront of a different political situation. It is a play which explores the issues of political refugees and reflects, more specifically, the plight of women refugees suspended "in transit" between the East and the West, between "barbarian lawlessness" and "the civilization of progress". This time we encounter a Medea who has "no country, no city, no home. / [She is] a refugee [in her] own body"(Taxidou, 2005, p.133).<sup>1</sup>

Taxidou's Medea is a very angry woman but the source of her anger is not simply Jason's marital infidelity. The playwright shifts the play's focus from Jason's betrayal on a personal level to Medea's recognition of her own betrayal of her cultural identity which begins with the murder of her own brother, and her subsequent yielding to Jason, the representative of the dominant culture and civilisation. Medea is angry at herself for being seduced by and surrendering to the hegemonic culture. She uses her body as a metaphor for a conquered land which "spreads from the heights of Prussa / across the volcanoes of the white islands / to the depths of the red sea"(p.135). Subsequently her revenge against Jason takes on the form of a rebellion against the imperial invader, and the killing of her children becomes an

act of defiance against the invader and a rejection of the acquired culture. Though her rejection by Jason on a personal level is present as a catalyst, it is her oppression and the annihilation of her cultural identity which is identified as the major source of her anger.

By historicising the core of the play, Taxidou writes a sharp, gendered critique of the atrocities committed in the name of civilisation and progress, while at the same time composing a play that gives substance to Brecht's main dramaturgical concepts, which recur persistently throughout the play. *Medea: A World Apart* unfolds within a tangible and very real historical framework which its original audience would understand and be struggling to come to terms with.

The play premiered at the Georgian International Festival of Theatre (GIFT) in Tbilisi, Georgia in October 1997. This was a symbolically significant time and location both in mythological and in socio-political terms. On a symbolic level Medea returns to Colchis triumphant in performance and that in itself is an act of assertion. Georgia is the ancient site of Colchis, Medea's homeland of the mythical Golden Fleece which Jason and his Argonauts were the first to colonise. On a socio-political level the performance was significant since it was performed at the first GIFT festival to be held after the end of the civil war between Georgia and Abkhazia, one of the bloodiest conflicts in the post-Soviet era. The festival itself, as Taxidou explains and the indicative acronym suggests, was a series of multi-cultural theatrical events, meant as "peace offerings" in an attempt to heal the rupture created by the war. In an account which the playwright gives of the performance, entitled "Medea comes Home", she presents the event as Medea's symbolic homecoming to the Black Sea area and reflects on how it was not only one of political significance, but also a renegotiation of the relationship between historical and mythological space. Furthermore, it was historically and culturally significant for Taxidou on a personal level, because as she explains, her adaptation

had been triggered by her response to the refugee problem in Greece and more specifically the plight of the Pontic Greeks (Taxidou, 2000, p.220).

In order to comprehend this political and civic dimension of the play one needs to place it within the historical and socio-political context which initiated its writing. Being a Greek of Pontic descent herself, Taxidou was interested in the history of the Greeks of the Black Sea, (also known as Pontic Greeks from the term Pontos derived from the Greek name of the Black Sea: *Pontos Euxeinos* "Hospitable Sea"). These people had arrived in the area as colonisers in the Archaic Period and remained there throughout Classical Antiquity, and the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires. The beginning of the end for these "colonies" of two and a half thousand years, which had retained their Hellenic identity to a significant degree, came in the late nineteenth century which brought a series of calamitous – for Greek history – historical events, most significant of which is what in Greek common parlance is known as "the Catastrophe" of 1922. In that year the Greeks, in an imperial venture supported by Britain and driven by a "great idea" to reconstruct a "greater Greece" out of the ruins of the Ottoman empire, invaded Asia Minor only to have their imperial dream smashed by Kemal Ataturk. The following year brought the Treaty of Lausanne and an exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey which saw almost a million Pontic Greeks deported to mainland Greece. That was the start of a series of prosecutions followed by deportations and transportations of these people from the land of ancient Colchis which they had inhabited for almost three millennia, to a "motherland" which was not a homeland at all. They moved to Greece as immigrants in waves and ever increasing numbers throughout the 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev began to lift the ban on mass emigration. Their numbers rose by the thousands in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Some who remained in Georgia were finally evacuated by the Greek government in an operation appropriately called

“Operation Golden Fleece” when a ship brought them off from Sukhum harbour in the middle of the war with Abkhazia in 1992. (Ascherson, 1996, pp.244-56)

The whole Pontic experience became for Taxidou an emblem of a “fractured notion of ethnicity, of the ‘other’ side of a Hellenism that superficially represents itself as homogeneous, all-pervasive, unitary and universal”(2000, p.220). It is this people’s sense of “Otherness” and the paradox of a motherland which is not home that her adaptation explores together with their status as refugees in modern Greece. Her work addresses the complex interrelations of home, nation, and nationhood, which are characteristic of this group of immigrants, especially in their relation to the “motherland” and their particular construction of “Greekness”.

Taxidou historicises Euripides’ play and transposes the myth of Medea and the first colonisers to modern-day Greece. She uses the discourse of gender and power to address the pressing contemporary issues of cultural borders and boundaries, belonging and being an outsider, assimilation and rejection, civilisation and “barbarism”. In her adaptation the ancient princess of Colchis is caught, like her descendents from the Black Sea, in the void between civilisations and history, struggling to identify and assert herself. She embodies the sense of “not belonging”, of struggling for self definition in the empty space created by the clash of cultures and history, which Taxidou identifies with the struggle of Pontic-Greek refugees. At the same time, by having it performed in Georgia, she places it within the contemporary history of Ancient Colchis whose citizens were experiencing the aftermath of a civil war.

Most appropriately *Medea: A World Apart* is set against a multiple ethnic and complex cultural-historical background. Its characters move through time and space from the Black Sea to Troy, to Iolkos, to Corinth and to modern-day Athens. It contrasts images of the East with its richness in colours, scents, lush nature, passion, and magic, to the bleak, colourless smells and noise of Athens, a modern metropolis where immigrants and refugees

have flocked seeking the idealised western way of life, only to be tragically disillusioned. This pastiche of time, myth and historical reality makes Taxidou's version of *Medea* a critique of a contemporary version of Hellenism but also of Western imperialism and its victimisation of innocent individuals, especially women. The text is a postmodern collage of images, a non-linear presentation in terms of mythological development and chronology. The narrative is presented in parts set off one against another and each is given its own structure as a play within a play. This constructs an essentially Brechtian play, whose "individual episodes are knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed"(Brecht, 1964, p.201). As a result the audience stand outside the experience and observe it rather than participate in it.

It is important to point out however, that Brecht is not Taxidou's sole influence. As she has acknowledged, "Euripides remains [her] main inspiration"(Rapti, 2005, p.91). The influence of Euripides is evident and not surprising since she believes him to be the most radical of ancient playwrights who showed the Athenians the shortcomings of their democracy. His work, she maintains, shattered the inherent connection between the theatre and the *polis* and projected "a view of the artist as an outsider, as critical of the society in which he works"(Taxidou, 2004, p.106).

Euripides is present in the major themes but also in the discourse of the play. Images and speeches are taken from the source play and re-modelled to suit the adaptation and its contemporary concerns. One such image that Taxidou takes from the source text and repeats in her play to a different effect is that of the axe which cut down the trees to make the Argo. In the opening scene of Euripides' *Medea* the nurse wonders why the gods "let the pines of Pelion / Fall to the woodman's axe to furnish oars / For those who went to fetch the golden fleece"(Euripides, 1988 l.3-6). Taxidou takes this image and re-writes it. Her Medea walks onto the stage asking for "the axe that cut the trees / of Pelion, to make the Argo"(Taxidou, 2005, p.128). She wants that same axe to fall onto her head and cut it in two. The image is

repeated five times in her monologue, every time to convey her sense of not belonging anywhere, of having lost what she left behind but also of being denied access to the “civilised” world she was brought to. The axe then becomes an important symbolic tool to reflect one of the major themes of her play: the void in-between cultures that refugee women live in; this big empty space of the world in-between civilisations, and the feeling of not belonging to the one they’ve left behind but not being assimilated in the new one either.

In her monologue Medea attempts to survive by re-defining herself through memory and asserting that space as her topos of existence. However, she does not seem to emerge triumphant as she does in Euripides, carried away in the chariot of the Sun God. Once she has killed her children she feels “transparent”; and as she speaks, she can watch her own body disappear. An aeroplane awaits her to take her to Athens where she will “host a chat show / To talk of women who share [her] plight”(p.154). She releases memories of her fatherland and leaves “the longing in [her] body. She no longer belongs to herself, because the “superior” civilisation “of a Hellenism that superficially represents itself as homogeneous, all-pervasive, unitary and universal” has swallowed her up, has devoured her (Taxidou, 2000, p.220). This is the situation that Taxidou sees the refugees from the Black Sea in; this is how the hegemonic culture of the “motherland” has left them without an identity in a place where they do not belong.

If Euripides’ influence is evident in Taxidou’s discourse, then Brecht’s theory is a pervasively present in the theatricality or “praxis” of her play. In writing an adaptation like *Medea : A World Apart*, Taxidou successfully proves what she argues in her book *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning* (2004), by putting her theory to practice. Contrary to claims that tragedy is associated with an obsolete idealist view of a fundamental society and is therefore meaningless to contemporary audiences and readers, she upholds its contemporary relevance by relating to the past that it embodies as “ruin and fragment”.



Allegory [Taxidou continues] allows us to do this. Rather than identifying with the ‘characters’ in these plays, as if they were us in some form of collective delusion, allegory sets up a relationship of critical negativity which allows for the reading of the tragic as both theatricality and myth, and as speculative philosophy (p.88).

Indeed Taxidou’s adaptation is an allegory, a collage of ideas, historical memory, myth, realities, past and present and metatheatrical devices, in which the main character, a barbarian sorceress princess who flies to Athens to get a job as a talk show host, philosophises and engages the audience by triggering their critical thinking. *Medea: A World Apart* validates the significance of history and underscores the materiality of the theatrical experience. In short Taxidou writes a play which transforms Euripides’ tragedy into a feminist example of Brecht’s epic theatre.

One dramaturgical device which firmly embeds this play within the Brechtian model of theatre is that the basic plot elements of Euripides’ tragedy are not “performed” but “related” by Medea; the “story” is not “acted” but “told”. According to Aristotle action in tragedy should be “enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative”(Aristotle, IX, 6, 1.24-33). This mimesis or imitation of an action is to bring about a catharsis whereby the audience is purged through the emotions of pity and fear. Brecht, in contrast, proposes that the story be “told” and not “shown” so that Aristotle’s “pity” and “fear” may be transformed into “desire for knowledge” and “readiness to help”(1964, pp.179-205). In Taxidou’s play *Medea* unfolds the events of her life by exposing them in a detailed, passionate narrative which exposes the well known myth and relates it to the present with numerous contemporary cultural references. She is not in dialogue with any character at any moment but advances the story by narrating events and through a series of “sequences” which are signalled with specific headings, and in which she tells of her encounters with Kreon and Aegeus. Finally, before leaving for Athens – not in the chariot of the Sun – she leaves a brief

note to Jason much like the ones we might leave to a member of our family in an everyday situation, where she simply announces that she has killed the children!

Jason,  
I have killed the children.  
I hope that has opened a hole in your heart  
that is as fierce, and as hollow, and as dry,  
as the one in mine. (p.154)

By narrating and not being in dialogue, Medea is at once centralised as a character but also set out as an actress performing a monologue. As a result, the spectator does not identify with the character, but instead observes the events and therefore Aristotle's "pity" and "fear" are transformed into historical awareness and desire to act. A Georgian audience in the process of coming to terms with the wounds of a civil war would see a need to breach the wounds of the civil conflict; a 1998 audience of European citizens would become more aware of the refugee problem and subsequently become more supportive of them or understand their plight.

Another technique which Brecht proposes in order to disrupt the enchanted gaze of the spectator and the identification of the actor with the character she is performing is the use of comic effects. Taxidou uses the comic discourse as yet another Brechtian "sign" and a "shock" which invites a critical look at prevailing power structures. The comedy in her adaptation lies mainly in the obvious intertwining of "ancient" with "modern" which she presents in surprising juxtapositions.

She has Medea tell in detail of how the fake civilised society which Jason brought her into, with its veneer of manners and appearances, refused to let her integrate and become "one of them". She remained an outsider despite her attempts for the opposite. She mentions in a self sarcastic, humorous way all the telling signs of a refugee or an immigrant in a foreign land. She speaks about Jason filling her house with all the modern electrical appliances, which she could not understand, and of popping "some magical device" out of his pocket to impress her every time he would come home:

I was so amazed [she says, addressing the absent Jason]  
My magic seemed so primitive  
compared to all this progress.  
The last thing you brought home  
was a WALKMAN  
so I could hear your tapes – you said –  
without bothering you (p.134).

Thus Medea describes the somewhat comic situation she finds herself in, but also makes an indirect statement about the lack of communication and the isolation of the individual which is typical of our technologically advanced contemporary society.

She talks about her inability to understand the strange customs and social interactions of the Greeks as well as their strange accents and their different clothes. She calls Greece “a strange land ... where wives say, yes darling, / is there anything I can get you, my love. / Oh that was the best ever”(p.133). These women would “attend ceremonies / wearing jeans and T-shirts” or wear “woollen leggings and long wide jumpers, as if to hide their breasts”(p.138) and “chew gum / as though it were caviar”(p.136). She explains the different habits which her husband was once attracted to and which have become the traits he sneers at. “We don’t do that here”(p.134), he would tell her, or feel embarrassed when he took her to cocktail parties of the “nouveaux riche” and she would wear “real silk, layers and layers of it, / in yellow, and red, and blue, and black”(p.136) which branded her “with a thirdworldliness / that makes everyone / uncomfortable at dinner parties”(p.137).

Despite the fact that she sneers at this civilisation, Medea puts her clothes away, symbols of who she was and what she represented, and becomes a non-entity in this foreign land “that has forgotten magic, / that relies only on what is written.” She was “a sacred woman” – she becomes a housewife. “Confined indoors. / The fields, the valleys, the mountains / and the seas are no longer mine” she laments, “You can keep your cities. Just give me back my sea”(p.139). Medea associates herself with images of nature and instinctive

passions whereas all that is proper, polished and “civilised” but also shallow and fake is associated with Jason and his “civilization of progress”(p.133).

Though Jason is present as a persona in the myth and his actions advance the plot development – as do Aegeus’ and Kreon’s – within *the action* of Taxidou’s adaptation, men are not given a voice, for there is no male part to be performed. The only other characters, apart from Medea, are a chorus of Trojan women, who “encase” and centralise Medea’s monologue, as they appear before and after her on stage. In fact one of these women, a cleaner who walks in wearing jeans, smoking, and carrying the tools of her trade, opens the play and later we recognise her as a member of the chorus. She identifies herself as a refugee in a modern unnamed city but also as Medea’s servant. Contrary to the Nurse who opens Euripides’ tragedy she does not enlist the audience’s sympathy for “her poor princess” but distances herself by presenting their class difference as a barrier to sharing their experiences as women grieving the loss of their homeland and being outsiders in a foreign land. “No, don’t expect me / to build up your sympathy for the Queen”, she tells the audience, “she is entitled to her pain and I to mine”(p.127). She expresses antipathy for Medea for having the luxury to “mourn her destiny” while she, as a hard working refugee, has not even had the time to mourn for the loss of her child who drowned. She leaves the stage in a hurry before Medea walks in, because she “has work to do”(p.128).

The unnamed cleaner and the chorus all appear again after Medea has left for Athens. They are in some kind of temporary accommodation, watching the funerals of Medea’s children, of Kreon, and of his daughter on television. They comment on the media coverage of the events and offer their views about Medea and her murderous acts. They smoke and squabble, reminisce and gossip and as any displaced refugees, await their fate. But they are not just any group of refugee women; they are Euripides’ Trojan Women, who all found themselves on the wrong side of another great war, the war of Troy.

The choice of chorus is of double significance. If they had been Corinthian women they would be members of the society that shuns Medea, and part of the oppressing hegemonic culture. Therefore they would not be able to identify with her, or she with them. Being Trojan however, they are women in exile, just like Medea, who all lost a home, a city, a man or a child of their own in a vicious war that was waged in the name of fairness and justice but whose true motive was imperial expansion. They fled the war amidst horrific scenes which they describe in lamentation. These scenes are reminiscent of every war, but to the mind of any reader or member of the audience who knows contemporary Greek history, they conjure images of the “catastrophe” of 1922 when people were trampled fleeing Asia Minor, trying to get onto boats to “the motherland”. Those that survived the passage found themselves, like these women, refugees in a land which was foreign, if not hostile.

The choice of Trojan Women is also significant in that their experiences can further relate to those of the Georgian audience who are trying to recover from the traumas of a war which invariably caused displacement, brought death, pain and mourning.

To add a further twist, foremost among these women are four women of royal descent whose losses are just as great and whose fall from their aristocratic position to being refugees matches that of Medea’s. They are Hecabe, Trojan Queen, mother of Hector and Paris now identified as the cleaner from the beginning of the play; Cassandra, her daughter – who has the gift of seeing the future but was cursed by Apollo never to be believed; Helen, the alleged cause of the Trojan war, abducted from Menelaus by Paris and hence Hecabe’s daughter-in-law; and finally Andromache, Hecabe’s other daughter-in-law, wife of Hector who was killed by Achilles. Their royal descent, contrasted to their present state reinforces the lamentable state they find themselves in. They who were all queens and princesses are now “*slightly battered and run down ... their make-up is exaggerated and slightly faded. They wear jewellery, lots of polyester, tight jeans and patent leather shoes*”(p.155).

They are “stuck” in Corinth, “waiting for the VISAS / to come through”(p.156), and cynically mourn for their losses and their present reality. Most of them waste their time waiting, they are unemployed and without hope, “an embarrassment to Gods and kings alike”(p.164). When they first got to Corinth some of them got jobs as cleaners, but now people won’t hire them anymore. They felt “awkward/ when they realised that their / cooks and cleaners and childminders / were teachers and doctors and engineers / just like themselves”(p.164). Taxidou succinctly paints the picture of any group of refugees in a modern metropolis of the western world.

Each of the named women of the chorus laments her own loss and bemoans her displacement as it is known to the audience through mythology, but also makes it contemporary in the mode of postmodern pastiche. Helen who “was hatched like an animal through an egg shell ... born of rape, shaped through rape, / hostage of rape”(p.159), suffers from optimistic delusions and admires Medea because she has become a star for the Athenian media. Cassandra whose “words come from the spit of a God / [who] spat in her mouth / ...sperm that makes words / [and] not babies”, suffers from “False Memory Syndrome”(p.168). Hecabe, the mother figure, is a cynical realist: “Get your acts together”(p.177), she tells “her daughters” as she looks for sleeping pills to give Cassandra to stop her prophetic rambling. Andromache, who describes her son’s horrific death and her lamentations over it, squabbles with Helen, in a clichéd sister-in-law relationship and silences her by saying “...once a tart always a tart”(p.177). The other women attempt to put an end to their tense relationships, reminding them of their common status as refugees, one which disregards any social distinctions:

Mothers, daughters, queens and slaves.  
Blood bonds or those drawn up by law.  
All disappear.  
This horror breaks down the lines that show  
who I am and who is she.(p.159)

Even Medea whom Hecabe despises for having the luxury to moan her destiny in style, while the rest of them have work to do and mouths to feed, stands outside her role as a performer and distinguishes herself from the character of Medea to become a refugee herself, “one of them”:

...the chorus gets on my nerves,  
...But I must show some understanding.  
Most of these women resent  
serving me, resent being a chorus altogether.  
...No, I mustn't alienate the chorus.  
I don't want to turn into  
one of those solipsistic,  
soul-searching characters.  
No, I am a woman of action.  
I need the chorus of women.  
They are the only ones  
who will understand my pain and my rage  
...After all I am one of them.(pp.140-1)

The device of metatheatre which Taxidou uses here and elsewhere in her adaptation is another most obvious *Verfremdungseffekt*, which engages the audience's critical participation on a level beyond that of the myth of Medea, the murderous mother, the wronged wife. Metatheatre brings the nature of the performance to the forefront of the audience's experience and thus proves how Euripidean tragedy and Brechtian epic theatre can go hand in hand.

In the performance which premiered the play in Tbilisi in Georgian translation from English, director Nana Kvashavadze takes the focus away from the contemporary aspect of the play, giving the production a melancholic, eerie quality and forwarding the sense of entrapment that Medea and the chorus feel as refugees caught in between cultures. The two parts of the play are fused into one so that Medea and Hecabe, Cassandra, Helen and Andromache all interact on stage throughout the performance.



Fig. 3.1 The Trojan Women and Medea on stage in Georgia

The play opens to the sound of howling wind, with the scene flooded in blue light; the setting is clearly a storm at sea. We can discern four figures draped in transparent white cloths suggestive of ships' sails, standing on what we later realise are caryatid columns whose heads are stuck to the ceiling and their bases to the floor.



Fig. 3.2 The refugees caught in the storm



The storm eventually dies down and the figures, who are the Trojan Women, step off the columns. Light floods the scene and we see the stage, a beach, littered with broken reminders of those ancient military campaigns, and of cultures long destroyed - a half-buried shield and sword, a shattered mirror, an old chest with ancient books and old photographs, jagged stumps of classic columns.



Fig. 3.3 The broken Caryatids

In her account of the production Taxidou explains that the Trojan Women stand on these columns and reach up, trying to connect the top to the bottom part in an attempt to “make whole again the shattered image”(2000, p.226). Indeed these women are trying – without success – to put back together the shattered pieces of their existence, and reassemble their fragmented identity.

At the front of the stage, lit by a spotlight, stands another prop around which the whole production seems to revolve. It is a tripod holding a large glass bowl half full with water which gives the impression of a transparent globe. On the top of this glass bowl there is a small replica of the Argo, Jason’s ship. The women come to it repeatedly and, using a beaker,

drink water from it. On several occasions Medea speaks to it, seemingly addressing the Argo as a signifier for Jason.



Fig. 3.4 Drinking from the fountain

While Taxidou writes, “This is clearly the Aegean”(2000, p.226), I would suggest it represents much more than that. It is the Mediterranean, it is the Black Sea, it is the sea as a life giving force for any civilisation and the sea which brought the women refugees to this foreign land but also a symbol of their desire to return to the homeland. The Argo on it is clearly a symbol of the colonial power structure and social hierarchy which has trapped these women “in transit” between cultures and civilisations.

What is very interesting in this production is that the same stage which functions as a sea and as a beach where the women land after the storm also functions as a confined space, a small room with a dungeon-like feeling to it. When the tops of the columns are lit with a cold blue light they give the impression of being small windows, high up on a wall which let through the cold light of daybreak or dusk. From time to time the ear-piercing sound of a train clanking across over the stage can be heard, further emphasising the sense of entrapment and the impossibility of escape from what one critic calls this “permanent celestial transit

camp”(Dawson Scott, 1998). Every time one of these trains passes overhead one gets the sense that the ruins and shattered pieces crumble even further, reinforcing the feeling of decay and corrosion. This image of a crumbling world out of which there is no apparent exit, would have made a very lasting and significant impression on an audience who had just been through the experience of a civil war and the disintegration of a political system.



Fig. 3.5 A dungeon-like transit camp

The end of the performance leaves the spectator with an overall feeling of melancholia and also with a sense of an impasse, a dead-end situation out of which there is no chance of escape. Understandably to a Georgian audience there is a strong political significance in this outcome of the play. However, what is left out of the performance, at least in visual terms, is the text’s postmodern collage of past and present and its non linear time-sequence, which are central to the overall effect of the play. Together with that, disappears the comic discourse which was so powerful in the text through the juxtaposition of “ancient” and “modern”, “mythological” and “historical”. The melancholia which is not overtly evident in the text of the play permeates the performance, formalising in that way its main concerns. Furthermore it

weakens the potential Brechtian strategies of the play in its lack of political specificity and romantic pessimism.

However, there are other gestures in the performance which carry specific political connotations and which could be defined as Brechtian *gesti*. *Gestus* for Brecht “means both gist and gesture; an attitude or a single aspect of an attitude, expressible in words or actions”(1964, p.42) which can be easily codified and understood. For the audience of this production this identifiable *gestus* would connect the wars of the past, which the myth of the play is based on, with their present historical and political reality: during the performance all five women wave about large white scarves which function as powerful visual representations, recognisable to the audience as symbols of a medieval Georgian tradition: The White Scarf Movement.



Fig 3.6 The white scarf

This was a custom whereby, in an attempt to stop war women would lay white scarves in between the fighting lines. During the war with Abkhazia, the ancient custom resurfaced in a different form:

At the height of the civil war in 1992 and amidst heated nationalist feelings Ketiv Dolidze [who played Medea in the performance] made a plea on national television for the women of Tbilisi to join her in the city's central square. More than 5,000 women did

so. She led them all onto a train that was heading straight for the front line. Once there, the women stood and held hands in front of the troops in an attempt to end the madness that the war had created. Various nationalist groups threatened to blow up the train, but the women all returned safely. (Taxidou, 2000, p.230)

It is this recognisable *gestus* that the Georgian audience applaud so passionately at the end of the performance in Tbilisi, and which gives the play specific historic significance within the specific historical moment of this performance.

Another *gestus* which adds an emblematic and parabolic quality to the performance is related to an hourglass which one of the Trojan Women holds in repeated instances through the play and which becomes symbolic of the inter-cultural, inter-historical and intertextual nucleus of the play.



Fig. 3.7 The hour-glass

When discussing a theory of culture and intercultural performance in contemporary theatre practice, Patrice Pavis (1992) imagines an “hourglass of cultures” in which the upper bowl is the foreign culture and the lower bowl is the target culture, our culture. The grains of sand are the grains of culture that flow slowly but steadily from the upper bowl to the lower and though they are the same grains, they arrange themselves differently when they pass from one

bowl to the other. It is this hourglass which features prominently in the performance of *Medea: A World Apart*. It becomes an emblem not only of the slow, hard passage of the refugees from one culture to the other, but also of the play as a twentieth century adaptation of a two thousand year old text with references to mythology, nineteenth and twentieth century history, about legendary women who find themselves in modern-day Corinth and Athens and is performed in present-day Colchis. This is indeed theatre at the crossroads of history, or to borrow the term from Pavis, “theatre at the crossroads of culture”.

In this play and this performance, Medea’s killing of her children is not centralised. Her act is presented as a radical uprooting of her children as seeds of the corrupt and decadent culture which has produced them. “They are not my children”, she says, “they are Jason’s bastards. / They have no mother... / They belong to the city that bred them”(p.140). This is the culture which has disempowered her and which she does not manage to defeat and conquer in order to redefine herself in her own terms like Demea or Müller’s Medea. The hegemonic culture has broken her will to such an extent that she cannot return to Colchis. She lets go of its traumatic memory which still stains her brain. A refugee’s path is a road of no return. The borders are not open both ways. Medea leaves Corinth but not triumphantly on a blazing chariot. She simply goes to a bigger city in the hope of getting a job. Her only step ahead is achieved through erasing all traces of the hegemonic culture from within her and sharing her experiences with other women refugees. Her hope for empowerment therefore lies in bonding with members of her own sex and sharing their plight as they share hers.

## NOTES

1. Taxidou, O. (2005). *Medea: A World Apart* in *Theatron 3* (Spring 2005): 125-177. All subsequent references to the play will appear in brackets after the citation

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## AFTERWORD

When Ariane Mnouchkine wrote the message for World Theatre Day in 2005, she composed a poem; an inspired invocation which personifies Theatre, and calls on it to help her – and by association every spectator of a theatrical event – in dire times:

Help! [she writes]  
Theatre, come to my rescue!  
I am asleep, Wake me  
I am lost in the dark, guide me, at least towards a candle...  
I am indifferent, strike me...  
I am mute, untie my tongue...  
I no longer dream, call me a coward or a fool  
I have forgotten, throw Memory in my face... (Mnouchkine, 2005)

This study of *Medeamaterial*, *Demea* and *Medea: A World Apart* demonstrates that this is theatre which does indeed “wake” us to the reality of the specific socio-political and historical situation within which each adaptation is set. This is theatre that shatters our indifference, guides us in the darkness of our contemporary reality and gives voice to the subaltern Other. It is theatre which, as Sarah Bryant-Bertail acknowledges, is “used as a forum to stage and critique the crises of our own era, to help us see the images we have constructed of our own historical existence, constructions that have real-life consequences”(2000, p.211). Or, to use Artaud’s words, “theatre that wakes us up heart and nerves”(Artaud, 1993, p.64).

What is particularly intriguing is that these texts, as well as their performances, adapt a play which was itself an adaptation of a very old and controversial myth, to which Euripides brought his own cultural moment. As Bernard Knox points out in his analysis of *Medea*, Euripides re-worked all the variants of the legend available to him and created his own version; “a version more shocking, more physically and psychologically violent than anything he found in the tradition”(1979, p.296). Knox explains that Euripides’ text was an adaptation which “left a deep and lasting impression in the minds of his Athenian audience ... [and] lost none of its power to fascinate and repel as the centuries went by”(p.295). He further maintains

that even for the Athenian audience of 431 BC Medea would be the very embodiment of difference, a foreign and “barbarian” woman, in contrast to a Greek and “civilised” hegemonic Establishment. Consequently, Euripides’ depiction of Medea – woman, wife, mother, *and* foreigner – as a heroic figure who lives by the creed by which Homeric heroes lived and died, being dangerous to her enemies and helpful to her friends, must have surprised and shocked his audience beyond description. In fact Euripides goes even further in challenging the traditional theatrical and social status quo when he lets Medea, unpunished and triumphant, leave Corinth borne away by the chariot of the god Helios, in the form of a “*deus ex machina*” – a device reserved exclusively for the gods. In his 1910 translation of *Medea*, Gilbert Murray goes as far as to engender the stage device, to convey the sense of Medea’s assumption of a god-like status and writes that Medea herself is the “*dea ex machina*”(Euripides, 1906, p.xi) thereby elevating Medea to the status of one of the Greek deities. Thus her human energy becomes a relentless force, the ferocious violence of the oppressed and betrayed which carries everything before it to destruction; even if it destroys also what it loves most.

One would have expected that a forum as public as the Greek theatre would typically authorise and sustain only traditional, hegemonic social expectations, including patriarchal values. However, *Medea* is an immensely subversive text that presents the rights, the heroism and the intelligence of the Other, of the outsider, of the woman. Her unexpected triumph at the end of the play is the triumph not merely of a woman wronged by her husband, but more significantly that of the ethnic Other, whom the hegemonic culture always sees as less intelligent, less logical, less civilised. If, as in the case of Medea, the subject is also a woman, then she becomes an even easier target for subjugation and exploitation by a more intelligent, civilised, male, superior society.

Indeed Jason is Euripides' ultimate portrait of the arrogant colonizer who embodies two related attitudes: metropolitan arrogance and a chauvinistic contempt, even fear of women. With an imperialist's tone, Jason argues that Medea is remarkable in her ungratefulness for his having brought her to a civilized country:

Firstly, instead of living among barbarians,  
You inhabit a Greek land and understand our ways,  
How to live by law instead of the sweet will of force.  
And all the Greeks considered you a clever woman.  
You were honored for it; while, if you were living at  
The ends of the earth, nobody would have heard of you. (Euripides, 1955, ll.536-41)

Of course the imperial-centred perspective is always that those Others live at "the ends of the earth". Consistent with such views is also Jason's thoroughly contemptuous view of women:

But you women have got into such a state of mind  
That, if your life at night is good, you think you have  
Everything; but, if in that quarter things go wrong,  
You will consider your best and truest interests  
Most hateful. It would have been better far for men  
To have got their children in some other way, and women  
Not to have existed. Then life would have been good. (ll.569-75)

Here Euripides directs his satire against Jason and the way he treats Medea, demonstrating how in the mind of the colonial imperialist the second sex and the second-class citizenship of the ethnic outsider easily fused into one. Therefore even in Euripides' play Medea's acts are not primarily against Creon or Jason but against the larger ideas that they embody and the society that they represent. So she does not in essence kill her own sons, sons that belong to her, but Jason's sons. When he says "having borne me sons, out of your lust and jealousy, you killed them"(Euripides, 1988, ll.1335-6), even Jason himself acknowledges that she killed *his* sons and *not* her own.

It is these qualities of Euripides' text that Muller, Butler and Taxidou adapt and re-locate to their own historical moment; and it is easy to see what each one of them found in Euripides' Medea that inspired them to see it as a powerful model for adaptation. They use the

concepts of hegemonic oppression and Otherness which permeate the source text to write new plays reflecting “the crises of their own era”. Furthermore all three choose to place emphasis on the fact that Medea’s act is not one of “lust and jealousy”. Instead they radicalise her act of infanticide and turn it into an act against the hegemonic structure that she seeks to subvert. They turn it furthermore, into an act of love for and protection of her children against the society which wronged and victimised her, based on her Otherness.

Through the use of the metatheatrical device, the playwrights present the act as a staged event and consequently succeed in distancing it from its traditional conception as the most horrific and unnatural of acts, and ascribe their own significance to it. “Watch your mother stage a play for you”(Müller, 1984, p.131), Medea says to her sons in *Medeamaterial*, and in *Demea* she sends them to watch the spectacle of their father’s wedding. In *Medea: A World Apart* they become the strings that Jason uses to play her like a puppet when she calls them “the thread that starts / from [her] womb / and is tied in a complicated knot / around Jason’s little finger”(Taxidou, 2005, p.140). Ultimately, the act becomes an event, which in turn becomes theatre, a performance in itself. It is in other words distanced from its emotional charge, freed from its usual connotations, and therefore viewed as a socially significant act.

Apart from understanding these plays within the concept of re-using material from the source text, it is also of the utmost significance to acknowledge them not as simple reflections of Euripides’ text and its concerns, or plain “alterations” of it, but as works of art in their own right. They are, as Fischlin and Fortier propose, like all adaptations, marked and distinctive re-contextualisations which “through verbal and theatrical devices, radically alter the significance of [the ancient] work so as to invoke that work and yet to be different from it – so that [each] adaptation is, and is not, [Euripides]” (2000, p.4). So, though all three playwrights acknowledge the influence from the scripts of antiquity, they clearly and significantly break away from the hegemonic form of the classical text itself and compose independent, self-

sustained theatre. They perform what Perteghella calls a “‘radical’ domestication” which is the process whereby adaptation “deterritorialize[s] the playtext (and its foreign culturality) and... transplant[s] it into the codes of the target, receiving culture” (2008, p.54). Perhaps Taxidou herself illuminates this process best when she writes that the story of Medea is one that “derives its power as much from the original Euripidean version and its mythological outlines as it does from the act of retelling. The original, the adaptation, the production and the tour all in varying degrees recast and throw into relief the debates between gender and power, empire, conquest and culture”(Taxidou, 2000, p.230).

It is also true that these adaptations do not defy the heritage that they are inspired by, nor do they wish to disregard it; on the contrary they treat history, myth and culture as an “immediately available and reusable memory bank”(Pavis, 1986, p.1). Instead of ignoring or covering up the “dust” of the classical text, they “historicise” it and draw attention to historical and cultural references by means of decontextualisation, separation and repetition. If we are to subscribe to Pavis’s analysis of postmodern drama, then all three of these adaptations are postmodern in their approach and structure in that they are inherently intertextual, and they deliberately evoke images of the “old” in a radically new and different context. As such, they fulfil a dual function: in the very process of adapting and reproducing drama, they break it into its component pieces, generating consequently their own meta-discourse.

So all three of these plays are not just inter-cultural texts and performances; they are also, and perhaps above all, historical and political narratives. They are a clear illustration of a step beyond what Barthes called “the death of the author”(1977) in that they illustrate the return of the author with a vengeance. These three playwrights do not keep themselves detached from what they write and they are all very much “alive” as authors of their plays, as are their sensibilities and concerns. Müller writes as an East German, disillusioned by the

course of history and critical of the reality of his country; Butler as a citizen of South Africa and an intellectual who is concerned about the socio-political effects of a racial regime; and Taxidou as an intellectual of Greek/Pontian descent who wishes to investigate the plight of refugees and the paradox of a homeland which is not “home”. This deliberate re-setting of the plays within a historical time period which reflects directly upon the contemporary moment, is another common influence, that of Brechtian epic theatre.

Brecht (1964) asked for a theatre that is not illusion. He did not want a theatre which would suck the spectator into a dream world where the problems are carefully resolved at the conclusion of the play, so that the spectator can comfortably leave them behind, on leaving the theatre. He calls for a theatre that challenges the dream world, that poses problems, and far from solving them, is designed to leave the spectator with that task to accomplish in the real world. He demands a theatre which portrays the attitudes that people adopt towards one another, whenever they are socio-historically significant, and which historicises the incidents that it portrays.

These adaptations are clearly informed by Brecht’s epic dramaturgy and definitely result in a political reading of the plays. They produce performances which question the hegemonic establishment and the centre of power. They use Medea as a symbol to show how lost identity can be regained through historical memory and engagement with contemporary political reality. They prove that, as Bhabha (1984) maintains, “the colonised is never *always* *impotent*; the coloniser is never *always* *powerful*”(cited in Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996, p.6). They confirm, furthermore, the value of Carlson’s (2003) concept of “haunting”, since they are haunted by the familiar myth they are retelling, by the history into which they transpose that myth and by the collective memory of the audience who understands the political/historical context within which they are set.

Finally Müller, Butler and Taxidou all create texts which take Shakespeare's famous theatrical metaphor of "all the world being a stage" and reverse it completely. For these playwrights do not treat the stage as if it were a representation of life. They use rather, the fictionality of life, the re-writeability of the text of history, as a model for the theatre and ultimately re-write the text of history on stage. They adapt Euripides' quintessential tragedy of alterity to give voice to the subaltern barbarian who is speaking and being heard loudly and clearly at the dawn of the third millennium.

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