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Medea by Catherine Edwards, The Crescent Theatre Company, The Crescent Theatre, 4th October 2011

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Recent academic retrospectives on the Medea-myth in art, literature and performance document what has been an extensive reception history,¹ though one largely dominated by the eponymous play of Euripides. The sense of closure evoked by such scholarship, when considered alongside the 'democratic turn' within Classics,² opens up the stage and page for innovative and exciting *Medeas* to emerge; with new voices posing the types of questions that have hitherto remained unasked, let alone unanswered. It is in the enfranchisement of certain marginalised groups to access ancient myth that the survival of a relevant *Medea* depends and it is arguably from the voices of women that the most thought-provoking *Medeas* have emerged and will continue to do so. A small-scale production made up of a cast of fourteen local amateur actors, Catherine Edwards' retelling approaches the Medea-myth from an unusual perspective, collapsing the play's performance history in on itself through a series of poignant additions and omissions.

This Birmingham-born *Medea* aired in the smaller of the two performance spaces that make up The Crescent Theatre, whose improvised-stage and seating area provides a level of intimacy not compatible with the more standard proscenium set-up of the Main House. Almost within touching distance of the actors, the audience's experience is one of voyeurism, given further emphasis by a claustrophobically dark stage design and rhythmic music that punctuates the action. The significance of this staging lies in the way that the conceptual slippage along the lines of cast and audience as well as the ambiguity of the boundary between on-stage and off-stage, culminates in a rejection of the binaries on which receptions of the *Medea* tend to be structured (e.g. man/woman, Greek/foreigner). Instead, this production explores the very mechanisms by which stories are made through the more general concerns of truth versus lies and myth versus reality, with the audience's participation as

¹ Clauss & Johnston 1997; Hall et al. 2000.

² Hardwick & Gillespie 2009-10.

complicit observers becoming increasingly important as the play reaches its denouement.

The pre-performance publicity highlighted what would, in this production, become a focus on the relationship between fact and fiction by raising the spectre of the scorned-wife in popular culture: 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned', only to hint at the artificial workings of this cliché with a promise to explore 'the myths and realities behind Medea'. It is in the subversion and interrogation of the play's performance history that makes this meta-theatrical *Medea* so successful.

In a collaborative, largely women-led effort, Edwards and director Kerry Murdock developed the script alongside cast members, some of whom were present from the project's inception (e.g. Deepa Bose as the Nurse and Paula Wall as Glauce), while others entered the fray later on, most notably Andrea Stephenson who played Medea. Edwards, Murdock and the cast read and re-read various translations of Euripides, including that of the relatively recent production by Tom Paulin with Northern Broadsides,³ taking the time to discuss and tease out what they felt were the main themes and issues of the play.

A version rather than a translation, Edwards was able to eschew fidelity to Euripides in favour of psychological realism. It was in this commitment to creating a coherent narrative that would appeal to a broad, non-specialist audience that saw the inclusion of several non-Euripidean plot devices and characters. For example, rather than introduce Medea's future protector, Aegeus, on his all too aptly timed return from consulting an oracle, his presence in Edwards is more straightforward: Corinth is at war with Athens. While with regards to characters, the main additions were Tisiphone, Queen of Corinth and Glauce, who despite being an integral part of the ancient plot, did not traditionally appear on stage.

In my interview with the producer, Edwards talked about how she and the cast were drawn to the silence surrounding Creon's queen/Glaucé's mother and it was as a

³ For a review, see Parkyn 2010.

consequence of this collective interest that the role came about.⁴ It is arguably in this type of flourish that classical reception is at its most exciting and sets productions like Edwards' apart from more run-of-the-mill, faithful translations. With the character of Tisiphone came the opportunity to explore the inner workings of the Corinthian court: Prior to this climactic turn of events, what has been the extent of Medea's presence at court? How have other women responded to Medea? How did Glauce feel about marrying Jason? Why does Creon really grant Medea one day's respite before her exile?

What is especially interesting is that the types of questions that Edwards et al. asked of the *Medea* seem to coincide with those asked by other female and/or feminist writers of classical reception. Of course, the 'what if' question has characterised women's artistic output since Virginia Woolf mused about Shakespeare's sister but it is only in the last few decades, as a result of the proliferation of women's responses to classical texts,⁵ that a discernible trend can be said to have emerged. Within feminist scholarship, the 'rescue' of the ancient female voice, both real and literary, has played a significant part in the larger process of expanding and diversifying the representation of women in all areas of life.⁶ Women writers of classical reception have taken up this task by giving a voice to female characters hitherto ignored or sidelined in ancient myth and literature.⁷

The decision by Edwards, Murdock and the cast to provide a significant speaking part for Glauce can be seen as another example of this 'rescuing' trend and is a decision shared by another woman writer of classical reception: Christa Wolf, in her novel, *Medea*. What is especially interesting about this similarity is that when asked about Wolf's novel, Edwards (and presumably the cast) had no knowledge of it.⁸ Their decision to include Glauce sprang more straightforwardly out of a feeling of intrigue concerning her role in the action and a refusal to leave out someone who plays such a significant, catalyst-like part in events. But it is not just the invention of a

⁴ Pers. comm.

⁵ The E-Seminar of Cox & Theodorakopoulos 2009-2010, which formed part of the Open University's Reception Project, was in response to the 'unprecedented upsurge in recent decades of women's translations and adaptations of and creative responses to classical myth and text'.

⁶ See e.g., Skinner 1987.

⁷ See e.g., Atwood 2005; Carol Ann Duffy 1999; Le Guin 2009; Christa Wolf 1989.

⁸ Pers. comm.

speaking part for Glauce where Edwards' and Wolf's *Medeas* coincide. Both seem to characterise the relationship between Glauce and Medea as one infused with latent sexual tension. In Wolf, Glauce's thwarted obsession with Medea sees her turn her attentions towards Jason as a way of taking revenge on the true object of her desire; while in Edwards, her Glauce appears both afraid of, and irresistibly drawn to, Medea's power to influence and instil fear in others.

Even more striking is how the way in which the Birmingham *Medea* subverts the myth's performance and literary history at the climax of the play also coincides with the conclusions of Wolf's novel. As mentioned above, the promotional literature for the production gave a nod towards what would be the play's meta-mythic scrutiny with a commitment to uncover 'the myths and realities behind Medea'. By the close of the play, the machinations of the Corinthian court are such that Medea's children are killed by Aegeus, but the crime is deliberately passed off as Medea's own. This is where the audience's voyeurism becomes most acute, as they are forced to weigh up their preconceptions about Medea as a consequence of her Euripidean-dominated performance history, with what they have just seen Aegeus do and the lies that are now being deliberately spread.

For most of the audience, this conclusion seemed to throw their entire knowledge-base as far as *Medea* was concerned into doubt and the responses were not wholly positive. I heard many sixth-form students, presumably watching the play to supplement their A-Level syllabus, complaining afterwards that Edwards et al. had simply got it all wrong. But surely this is the beauty of classical reception and the strength of this particular production? It warns against blind acceptance of stories that are passed down to us, encouraging interrogation of their origins and the formation of our own conclusions. From a feminist perspective, as was certainly the case with Wolf's novel, the exposure of Medea's infanticide as merely vicious rumour taps into the political potential of women's writing of classical reception. Showing the mechanisms by which lie becomes rumour becomes fact, the workings of misogyny are exposed and with this transparency comes the means by which misogynist-narratives can be subverted. As such, if the sixth-form students' discomfort arose from a realisation that the cultural narratives they had hitherto accepted could all be lies, then I think the lesson of Edwards' *Medea* could not be more valuable.

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