

CHAPTER 1



Medea and the Mind of the Murderer

Edith Hall

A murderess is only an ordinary woman in a temper
(ENID BAGNOLD)

It seems surprising today that patriarchal Freudian psychologists originally adopted the figure of Medea in order to label the unconscious hatred of a mother for her maturing daughter, a phenomenon once labelled the 'Medea Complex'.¹ However, by 1948 it had been pointed out that the ancient Greek Medea had been the mother and murderer not of daughters but of sons.² Actually, boys have in modern times always been far more vulnerable than girls to murder by their mothers.³ That Medea's crime is today more frequently repeated than daughter-murder is perhaps simply coincidence rather than evidence for a psychological aetiology of the crime so fundamental as to be universally valid for all eras. However, it is most likely to be evidence of women reacting similarly in two societies which, although in other respects different, were marked by not dissimilar gender-based discrimination. Moreover, the greater modern instance of maternal son-murder needs to be seen in the wider criminological context, since women attack males of all ages far more often than they do other females in all types of murder and violent crime.⁴ As feminist criminologists have stressed, there are specific reasons why women kill and why it is usually their husbands, lovers and male children that they kill.⁵

Relative to some other domestic crimes, the sociological and psychoanalytical bibliography on maternal filicide is small, reflecting the horror it arouses. However, the data, such as it is, paints a consistent picture and one which is startlingly similar to the image of the child-killing mother painted by Euripides in his tragedy *Medea*. Study after study shows that in modern Western culture the average filicidal mother is in her mid-twenties (significantly, a decade younger than other female homicides),⁶ has been married only once, has two or three children and (unlike male filicidal parents) has custody of them,⁷ and has committed one prior offence.⁸ Educational deprivation is not as important a factor as might be expected; and although police and psychiatrists are far quicker to diagnose mental illness than they are in the case of male filicides,⁹ not a single study exists of evidence for mental impairment in filicidal mothers.¹⁰ Many studies of maternal filicide, including an important one in Illinois, reveal that almost all instances take place in the home, with the mother as the sole offender.¹¹ A seminal North American study of parental filicide classified its primary motivations as altruism, psychosis, the fact that the child was unwanted, accident and (prominently) spousal revenge.¹² In Canada, maternal filicides have

been diagnosed as commonly motivated by revenge, with anger against the father being taken out on male progeny.¹³ The social isolation and strain on financial resources suffered by the mother are also crucial factors.¹⁴

Medea's children are still young enough to be in her care rather than their father's, that is, under eight years of age, which suggests that she is imagined as being under thirty years old. She has been married only once, has two children (in her sole care) and has committed a murder previously (that of her brother). The filicide takes place in the home, with the mother as the sole offender, and she is certainly suffering from social isolation and strain on her financial ability to look after the children. Her stated motives are overwhelmingly dominated by the desire for revenge on her husband Jason. She is well educated and her intellectual capacities seem to be unimpaired.

These several correspondences between the portrait of Medea and the all too frequent cases reported in our news media provide one reason why *Medea* is the most immediately accessible of all Greek tragedies. Another is that the figure of the child-harming woman, especially the mother who kills her own children, is undoubtedly the most reviled in our own cultural repertoire of villains. Although men as well as women kill their children in the immediate aftermath of a split from the co-parent, especially if the mother has a new sexual partner, they are not marked out for the same degree of cultural odium that their female counterparts endure. As the playwright Tony Harrison put it in *Medea: A Sex-War Opera* (1985), referring to the greater obloquy that Medea has attracted in comparison with her male counterpart in ancient myth, Heracles:

He killed his children. So where
is Hercules's electric chair?
A children slayer? Or is Medea
The one child-murderer you fear?¹⁵

However, putting aside, if we can, the emotional circumstances — our reaction to the bloodcurdling violence and our identification with the little victims — it is important to realize that the strong apparent correspondences between the Euripidean Medea and the profiles of modern filicidal mothers are misleading. Our outraged abomination of the simple *fact* that Medea is responsible for her own sons' death is a culturally specific reaction. Modern psychologists correctly insist that maternal filicide, far from being universally or absolutely defined as an atrocity, is perceived differently in different cultures; the marked variations in the way it is thought about are closely linked to economic, social and religious factors.¹⁶ Since Jason is effectively downgrading his own sons' status relative to himself and their anticipated patrimony by taking a new wife and leaving them with their mother, it may be particularly relevant to the story of Medea's murder of her children that an important factor in mothers' valuation of and commitment to raising a child is, in many cultures, her perception of the *father's* level of valuation and commitment to them.¹⁷ However, the figure of the Euripidean Medea is often discussed in absolute terms. Indeed, her filicide has frequently been held up as the ultimate example of the ultimate crime. The sadistic murder of her love rival has attracted infinitely less censure.

Since its origins, Greek tragedy has had a close and complicated relationship with criminal law. The ancient Greek word for an actor — *hypokritēs* — also means an individual responding to interrogation in court. Similarly to legal trials, tragedies show crimes being committed and ask their audiences, like judges and juries, to assess the moral issues, attribute blame and authorize punishment.¹⁸ Some ancient Greek tragedies included trials (e.g. Aeschylus's *Eumenides*); in the contemporary world, trials that are televised — like that of O. J. Simpson — raise questions about where reality ends and fiction and entertainment begin.¹⁹

One reason for the cultural longevity of Euripides' *Medea* is certainly that it has so often been connected with discussions about criminal legislation as well as, more broadly, the treatment of women before the law. As early as the fourth century BC, just a few decades after Euripides' masterpiece premiered in 431 BC, a famous tragedian named Carcinus gave *Medea* a highly legalistic speech in her own self-defence, in which she argued that it would have been irrational to kill the children while leaving Jason alive.²⁰ In the eighteenth century, when *Medea* was regularly depicted as going mad, the play was adapted in ways that drastically diminished her criminal responsibility.²¹ In Victorian England, the prominent issue was the rival rights over children of divorced mothers and fathers, and the play was repeatedly staged in different adaptations around the time of the great 1857 Divorce Act.²² In the first decade of the twentieth century, productions across Europe began to address the question not only of women's economic and social equality, but of women's exclusion from the vote and politics.²³ The crime of child-killing began to be seen as, in some cases, a woman's response to a situation in which she was almost completely powerless, economically and politically.

Medea has more recently become a totemic figure. Later twentieth- and twenty-first-century *Medeas* have been reconfigured as victims of patriarchal oppression, stung into action only after years of suffering at the hands of men who have exploited their economic dependence in order to expose them to criminal abuse: *Medea* has even come to represent a symbol of resistance for women serving prison sentences for many more (and much more trivial) crimes than she ever herself committed. In California, a project initiated by Rhodessa Jones encouraging incarcerated women to use theatre to examine their pasts was entitled 'The *Medea* Project'.²⁴ However, the discussion here centres on another aspect of the law. It argues that one of the reasons *Medea* has proved so perennially fascinating is that it thinks about *murder as a crime*. In one sense, the identity of the victims does not matter, nor the sex of the killer: crucially, this is the first play in the Western theatrical tradition in which the audience watches, in great detail, someone make up his or her mind to kill and then carry out the decision. The play asks why people commit murder and shows how they wrestle with terrible emotions like anger and jealousy. The issue is made more complicated because the play does acknowledge that *Medea* has been involved in a killing before — that of her own brother years ago in the Black Sea. This, of course, raises the question of whether previous offences are relevant and can be used as evidence in a legal trial. However, the play, in particular, tackles head-on the issue of criminal responsibility by questioning the distinctions between 'unprovoked' murder and manslaughter under 'provocation' — what in the USA is called the

distinction between 'premeditated' first-degree murder and 'unpremeditated' second-degree murder. *Medea* is the only surviving Greek tragedy in which a murder is committed in this ambiguous moral terrain. Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* has been planned for years and is therefore absolutely premeditated. Heracles in Euripides' *Heracles Furens* and Agave in his *Bacchae* kill their children while demonstrably deluded and insane. The nearest parallels to *Medea* are actually offered by two other parents in Euripides. Creusa in *Ion* is persuaded to make an attempt on the life a youth she does not know is her son while she is sane but distraught. Agamemnon in *Iphigenia in Aulis* authorizes the sacrifice of his daughter when clinically sane but emotionally confused and under intense pressure from his brother and some sections within his community.

In the history of adaptations, from ancient Greece to the third millennium, the ambiguity inherent in the original *Medea* of Euripides has prompted numerous responses to *Medea's* criminal culpability or lack of it. It has produced a wide variety of adaptations for performance related to historical changes in the cultural and legal views of murder, provocation and premeditation. In the nineteenth century the great Italian actress Adelaide Ristori refused to play the role of *Medea* unless the play was rewritten by Ernest Legouvé to make the child-killing an act motivated by altruism (that is, to save the boys from a worse and more painful death).²⁵ When Diana Rigg took the role of *Medea* in 1993, directed by Jonathan Kent — a production that was a big box-office hit in both London and New York — she deliberately made her *Medea* as sane and intellectually considered as possible. Yet Fiona Shaw, a few years later, presented the murder of the children as taking place during a fit of psychosis brought on by intolerable provocation — *Medea* seems to have been thinking she was bathing the children when she killed them. Every actress, every translator and every director has to make this fundamental choice.

Most legislatures, including those of classical Athens and third-millennial North America, Britain and Germany, acknowledge that if violence has been a spontaneous response to unreasonable provocation, this can be a factor that mitigates an individual's culpability for a crime. Provocation as a defence attempts to excuse a crime by alleging a 'sudden' or 'temporary' 'loss of control' (as opposed to a plea of insanity) in response to another's provocative conduct. If provocation can be proven, it can cut prison sentences by years. In the UK and some other Common Law jurisdictions it is *only* available against a charge of murder and only acts to reduce the conviction to voluntary manslaughter. In the USA the absence of premeditation is one of the ways of distinguishing second-degree murder from first-degree murder, yet in some states of the USA premeditation has been seen as requiring *only a few seconds' deliberation* before the murderous act, while in others it can be seen as requiring *several hours*. How long has *Medea* got?²⁶ In England, the crucial terms are in Section 3 of the Homicide Act 1957:

Where on a charge of murder there is evidence on which the jury can find that the person charged was provoked (whether by things done or by things said or by both together) to lose his self-control, the question whether the provocation was enough to make a reasonable man do as he did shall be left to be determined by the jury; and in determining that question the jury shall take

into account everything both done and said according to the effect which, in their opinion, it would have on a reasonable man.

The 1957 act changed Common Law in Britain, which had previously provided that provocation *must* be more than words alone and a form of violence by the victim towards the accused, subject only to two exceptions: a husband discovering his wife in the act of adultery and a father discovering someone committing sodomy on his son! Instead, the new Act provided that provocation can be by *anything* done or said without it having to be an illegal act; the provoker and the deceased can be third parties (i.e., Medea could claim that she was provoked by Creon and Jason into murdering her children). If the accused was provoked, *who provoked her is irrelevant*.

My view that Euripides is making us all scrutinize the difficulty of distinguishing between provoked and unprovoked murder is supported by the fact that this distinction was acknowledged in the legal system of his own day, namely, in classical Athens of the fifth century BC. There has survived a speech by the Athenian lawyer Lysias, called *On the Murder of Eratosthenes*. This is the actual defence speech of a man on trial within a few decades of the première of Euripides' *Medea*.²⁷ He freely admits that he has killed a man named Eratosthenes, but is asking to be acquitted because Athenian law allowed a man to kill another whom he found in bed with his wife. No entrapment was allowed and the occasion had to arise spontaneously. However, the killer did *not* have to prove that he had only just discovered that the affair was going on. The man on trial says that his slave girl had told him about the affair and he had gone home, with witnesses, to find the man standing naked on his own marriage bed beside his wife. It was at this sight that he became angry and struck the lover. The implication is that killing a man found in this sexual situation with your wife is perfectly understandable!

Nonetheless, even to raise the question of diminished responsibility in the case of Euripides' *Medea* may seem fundamentally misguided. When she finally makes up her mind to commit child-murder, she notoriously states that although she is well aware that what she is going to do is wrong, her internal organ of passionate emotion, what the Greeks called her *thumos*, has overwhelmed the conclusions to which her deliberations have (or would) lead her — that is, her emotion has overwhelmed her reason (1079–80). These two iambic lines, favourites of ancient philosophers,²⁸ thus explicitly frame her as the protagonist in the earliest known version of any Greek myth to make a mother kill her own children *knowingly*. This was almost certainly Euripides' own innovation in 431 BC,²⁹ and a shocking departure from the ancient convention by which filicidal parents were exonerated (up to a point) by a fit of madness at the time the crime was committed: examples, of course, include Heracles in Euripides' *Heracles Furens* and Agave in his *Bacchae*.

Does the play, however, imply that Medea has really been able to think clearly about what she is doing? At the beginning we hear that Jason and Medea arrived in Corinth as man and wife some time ago. Medea is described by the Nurse as someone 'who has won a warm welcome from her new fellow citizens and seeks to please her husband in all she does' (11–13). However, at the moment the play opens Jason has, it seems just a day or two earlier, abandoned Medea to marry instead the Corinthian princess, daughter of Creon. The exact timing of the wedding rituals is

left vague, partly because there was no one exact minute in ancient Athenian law when a couple became completely married legally, at least until the birth of the first child acknowledged by the father.

Medea has been lying prostrate and un-fed ever since she heard the news that she had been 'just lately' abandoned by her husband (25–26), for a period of time which cannot be understood as more than hours or a few days at the most. Although her Nurse is terrified of what she may do and feels fear of a general kind on behalf of the children (45–46), until after the Aegeus scene (i.e. until more than halfway through the play) there is only one suggestion that they are in serious danger. This suggestion is Medea's own inclusive curse on her whole family — comprising the children, herself as the 'wretched mother', the father and the whole household (113–14). The occurrence that actually precipitates her into action of any kind is Creon's arrival to announce her banishment with immediate effect: all the subsequent events in the play then accelerate over a matter of the few hours' grace she succeeds in extracting from him. The exile decree is certainly a measure which has only just been taken, since it is to announce Creon's decision that the tutor arrives (67–72). It is the immediate impact on Medea of this fresh blow that the play dramatizes. Medea commits *all* the murders during the same day that she receives this news. She has less than twenty-four hours to find a solution. It could be argued by a barrister that this is really unbearable psychological pressure. The banishment — decree of permanent exile from Corinth — tends to be overlooked by modern interpreters of the ancient play, but in the ancient world to be without a city, or friends in any other city, especially for a woman, was a virtual death sentence. The degree of panic which it induces in Medea is palpable: it is revealed, just after Creon leaves, in her improbable fantasies about the different ways she could try to steal into the palace and kill Jason and his bride (376–80). Creon's big mistake is to allow a woman in this volatile state of mind alone to organize anything at all.

The blows then rain hard on Medea's head. Jason arrives, but instead of helping her he goads her and insults her during the course of some of the most unpleasant and insensitive speeches in world theatre. He even claims that he has left her for another woman for her own good! He also provokes her by talking about sex and about her different ethnicity; yet the idea of killing the children is still not explicitly formulated in Medea's mind until after the Aegeus scene, the purpose of which is less to provide Medea with an ally than to make her aware of just how much psychological pain can be caused a man by childlessness. It is Aegeus's misery which prompts Medea into conceiving her plan to make Jason survive, but suffer. The decision remains far from final, however, and the psychological point of the 'vacillation' speech, during which Medea appears to change her mind no fewer than *four times*, is to portray that very struggle between Medea's heart and her mind — her passion and her ability to make reasoned decisions — that she finally admits has been won by the former (1079–80).

However, she *still* does not follow the boys inside to do it! She waits through thirty-five lines of tense anapaests while the chorus marches, reciting gloomily, around the stage. Euripides is showing us a woman who is struggling morally and procrastinating. She is in crisis. When the messenger arrives, he recommends that

she escape by any means possible and concludes by saying that her dire punishment is unavoidable. Medea's first words after the messenger's speech are, finally: 'My friends, I have decided to act at once. I will kill the children and then leave this land' (1236-37). She is not shown wavering again.

If Medea were a classical Athenian male who could prove that she had murdered her spouse's lover at the moment their affair was discovered, then she would have been acquitted at least of that crime. Medea, of course, for much of the time thinks of herself in masculine terms, using the language — including the term *thumos* — appropriate to Homeric warriors such as Achilles.³⁰ She believes that she is an important person who has been insulted and publicly humiliated. Moreover, Medea's state of psychological shock at being abandoned may be a day or two old, but she is banished and then argues violently with her husband *immediately* before the murders she commits: they may indeed be 'premeditated', but the 'premeditation' is extremely compressed and abridged. Alternatively, it could be argued that Euripides has stretched the precise definitions of 'sudden' violence in response to unbearable 'provocation' to their absolute limits. He is working on exactly the legal and psychological borderlines that judges and juries have to work on all the time, even in our own day.

However, the law has never been gender-blind; and contemporary feminist lawyers have been arguing that the range of defences available in the case of murder are hopelessly sexist, since they are defined with a male defendant in mind: the mitigation of a murder charge on the ground of sudden anger was framed (and is very much seen as) a 'male' defence suited to deaths consequent upon pub brawls and similar situations. Women who kill tend to do so after more extended periods of cumulative provocation or psychological hardship and in less obviously explosive circumstances. In Britain, women have been convicted of murder, rather than the manslaughter that brings with it a much lighter sentence, of many fewer years, even after being systematically tortured and abused for long periods. The sexism inherent within ancient Greek psychology and law is also relevant, although from a different viewpoint, to the case of Euripides' Medea. Her status as a responsible and morally autonomous legal agent, since she is female, is fundamentally ambiguous, even anomalous.

Aristotle, using the same linguistic stem as Medea had a hundred years earlier (*bouleu-*), considered that the ability to deliberate (in Greek, *bouleuesthai*) on ethical decisions was, in women, inoperative or 'lacking governance' (*a-kyron*, *Politics* 1.1260a). The word for 'lacking governance' is connected with the same root, *kyr-*, as the word which in Athenian society designated the male legal 'guardian' and representative — father, brother, husband or uncle — whom every woman was required to have and to obey throughout her life (her *kyrios*). This means that the 'governance' which Aristotle held was denied to the female's deliberative capacity was, in fact, the equivalent of male legal authority over the female. Thus according to ancient Greek men, female brains, especially the parts of them that take ethical decisions, *can* only operate safely under male supervision.³¹ Women need constant moral supervision. Jason and Creon were unwise to leave Medea unsupervised.

Since Medea has been abandoned without a husband, brother or father to supervise and control her, Jason has created a situation in which there is a much greater likelihood that she will act unreasonably. Indeed, almost all Greek tragedy can be interpreted as illustrating Aristotle's view of the female deliberative faculty, since every tragic woman who becomes transgressive is either temporarily or permanently husbandless and always lacks the presence and authority of a sanctioned *kyrios*. Phaedra falls in love when her husband goes away; Clytemnestra takes a lover and plots Agamemnon's death when he goes to Troy; the virgins Electra and Antigone are left without fathers and brothers in the house when they begin to rebel against male authority. One other factor needs to be taken into account here: ancient Greek medicine and medical writers such as Hippocrates thought that women of childbearing age who had no husbands or regular sex life were prone to madness because their wombs wandered around their body and damaged their mental ability and emotional self-control.¹²

Euripides' *Medea* not only deconstructs the psychic categories of 'male' and 'female' but also raises questions about the precise definitions of moral responsibility, provocation and premeditation which the blunt instruments of both ancient and modern criminal law need to utilize. *Medea* is the first and perhaps the greatest of murder dramas. *Medea's* resistance to clear-cut psychological and legal categorization has always helped to keep her on our minds and looks set to be a major factor in the continued revival of her play during the third millennium.

Notes to Chapter 1

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13. Lomis, p. 505.
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24. See Rena Fraden, *Imagining Medea, Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
25. Hall and Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy*, pp. 402–04.
26. In Germany Article 213 of the *Strafgesetzbuch*, 'Minder schwerer Fall des Totschlags' [less serious case of manslaughter], speaks of the killer being less culpable: 'War der Totschläger ohne eigene Schuld durch eine ihm oder einem Angehörigen zugefügte Mißhandlung oder schwere Beleidigung von dem getöteten Menschen zum Zorn gereizt und hierdurch auf der Stelle zur Tat hingerissen worden oder liegt sonst ein minder schwerer Fall vor, so ist die Strafe Freiheitsstrafe von einem Jahr bis zu zehn Jahren' [In the case of the person who committed manslaughter, having been provoked to anger through no fault of his own but through ill-treatment or a grievous insult inflicted upon him or a family member by the person killed and thus provoked on the spot to commit the deed; or in another, less serious, case, the penalty is imprisonment for between one and ten years]. <http://www.gesetze-im-internet.de/stgb/_213.html> [accessed 4 February 2010].
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32. Hall, 'Medea on the 18th-century London Stage', pp. 134, 191.

Unbinding Medea

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Antiquity to the 21st Century*



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