

The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children by Lillian Corti

Review by: Christian Rogowski

Comparative Literature Studies, Vol. 37, No. 3 (2000), pp. 361-364

Published by: [Penn State University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40247261>

Accessed: 27/11/2011 12:54

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Penn State University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Comparative Literature Studies.

The Myth of Medea and the Murder of Children. By Lillian Corti. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. xxi + 242 pp. \$ 59.95.

Medea, as introduced in the tragedy of Euripides, is etched in the Western consciousness as the murderess of her own children. In the present study, Lillian Corti approaches literary representations of the Medea myth by drawing on psychological theories of child development in the wake of Freud, most notably Alice Miller and Dorothy Bloch. Critics have long noted profound shortcomings in Freud's theories on human maturation. It will be remembered that in the Oedipus myth, which serves as Freud's crown witness for allegedly universal developmental tendencies, the cycle of erotic rivalry and violent destruction is actually started with an instance of child abuse: young Oedipus is abandoned to die by his parents for fear of an ominous prophecy. It can be argued, then, that Freud's concept of the "Oedipus Complex" ignores crucial components of the myth, in effect reversing its logic by ascribing destructive erotic desires to infants while downplaying the impact of violent parental behavior on the development of children. The Medea myth, which centers on the fear of an infanticidal parent, can be regarded, Corti suggests, as a kind of complement and corrective to the Oedipus myth, articulating a pervasive "hostility toward children" (xvi) that characterizes a variety of cultures, most notably our own Western civilization. In her introductory chapter, Corti discusses anthropological, sociological, and psychological sources that indicate that violence toward children is largely condoned as a social practice yet considered inadmissible as individual behavior. In the figure of Medea—the child murderess, ostracized foreigner, and savage witch—Corti finds an archetypal embodiment of the scapegoating that ensues from this contradictory logic.

The main part of Corti's book comprises four chapters, each devoted to an in-depth analysis of a major dramatic representation of Medea, with a fifth chapter offering a survey of treatments of the myth in the twentieth century. Throughout, Corti focuses on the infanticide motif, attempting to construct a psychological profile of the characters and to relate this profile to observations made in clinical psychology. At the same time, Corti aims to read each version of the myth as an indicator of attitudes toward children prevalent in the historical and cultural context of the given period. This approach, it turns out, is perhaps better suited to some versions than to others, depending on the kind of textual and contextual

information on hand. For instance, some readers may find it difficult to follow Corti's lead with regard to the *Medea* of Euripides. The play offers next to no information on the biographical background of the main character, casting doubt on the effort to construe a history of parental abuse as the cause of Medea's violent behavior. Here it seems that Corti's thematic focus does not always allow the text to speak for itself. Instead, modern psychological concepts are called upon to view Medea's development in the drama as a "complete transformation from afflicted child to persecutory parent" (31).

The notion of the cyclic perpetuation of abusive behavior passed on from one generation to another appears more applicable to Seneca's version of *Medea*. In first-century Rome, with its chaotic power struggles and outbursts of random violence, individual lives could be destroyed on a moment's whim. Corti proposes that the ensuing existential uncertainty had a profoundly traumatic effect on the development of children. In her reading, the savage virago of Seneca's version emerges as a projection of pervasive mortal fear. Seneca's *Medea* transposes problems inherent in the political system onto a scapegoat overdetermined as Other. In his philosophical writings, Seneca advocates control over excessive emotions such as anger. His *Medea*, however, shows that in the given situation such self-restraint, normally a useful survival strategy, can become impossible. In this fashion, Corti argues, Seneca cautiously and covertly critiques Roman society, while at the same time subtly questioning his own overt philosophy of Stoic resignation to the status quo.

Corneille's *Médée*, written in a period of transition from feudalism to absolutist monarchy, to Corti reflects the emotional complexities generated by seventeenth-century French courtly society, in which status and survival depended on a complex system of dependencies and obligations. The precarious logic of inclusion and exclusion characteristic of court life is highlighted by the emphasis Corneille places on Medea's rival, Creusa, for the first time a character in her own right, and on Pollux, a friend of Jason's and a character invented by Corneille. The young woman, stuck in a sexual and power battle not of her own making, and the young man, whose position as outsider allows him to voice a critical perspective, become emblems of what Corti views as Corneille's central concern, that of exposing the "conflict between exploitive, irresponsible elders and vulnerable, anguished youth" (87). Medea's act of violence explodes the general hypocrisy of this society and questions the legitimacy of dominion.

The longest, and perhaps the most convincing, chapter is devoted to a discussion of the *Medea* trilogy *Das goldene Vliess* (*The Golden Fleece*,

1821) by Austrian dramatist Franz Grillparzer. Here, modern notions of developmental psychology seem particularly pertinent, since Grillparzer construes a long and complex prehistory that motivates Medea's eventual outburst, in effect providing the reader/spectator with a kind of developmental profile centered on a pattern of "parental rejection followed by remorseful compliance of the rejected child" (132). His Medea displays patterns of passive-aggressive behavior, learned in traumatic moments of humiliation, bearing a strong resemblance to what Alice Miller describes as the "poisonous pedagogy" (126) that leads to a propensity toward violence. In the sympathetic portrayal Grillparzer construes of Medea as the multiply victimized outsider, Corti detects a proto-feminist awareness of gender issues and a subtle critique of nineteenth-century racial prejudice, such as anti-Semitic stereotypes. She interprets Medea's violence as the result of an internalization of a negative self-image and productively links Grillparzer's bleak assessment of human relations to Schopenhauer's pessimistic and anti-sensual philosophy.

The final chapter on Medea in the twentieth century is, on the whole, less successful, primarily because the material appears too varied. The criteria for choosing some seventeen versions out of around one hundred documented treatments of the Medea motif remain unclear (as does the function of the chronological list of some performances that opens the book but that is not connected to any of the chapters). Broad as Corti's concept of a general "hostility toward children" is, it cannot quite accommodate the tremendous range of permutations of the myth that have proliferated in our century, including modernizations of the tragedy (Jean Anouilh's *Médée*, 1946), political agitation in 1960s Berkeley (Robert Duncan's *Medea at Kolchis, the Maiden Head*, 1965), domestic psychodrama (Francine Ringold's *The Games People Play*, 1975), camp AIDS melodrama (Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theatrical Company's *Medea*, 1987), and a recent episode of the TV sitcom *Northern Exposure*. In the limited space she allows herself in the chapter, Corti's remarks on these and other versions are of necessity somewhat cursory. Perhaps it would have been better to focus on a limited number of crucial versions instead of attempting to give a broad—if still "incomplete"—overview. The best sections of the chapter concern the overlap of racial, social, and gender issues, such as an interesting discussion of Countee Cullen's *Medea in Africa* (1959) and an insightful reading of Toni Morrison's novel *Be-loved* (1987). Other parts, such as the remarks on Hans Henny Jahnn's erotically charged *Medea* (1926), Pier Paolo Pasolini's famous film version starring Maria Callas (1969), and Heiner Müller's post-apocalyptic

Medeamaterial (1983), lack the analytical refinement of which the author is clearly capable.

Given Corti's focus on the theme of violence toward children in a psychological and political context it is surprising that she does not discuss what is perhaps the most significant recent retelling of the Medea myth: Christa Wolf's *Medea. Stimmen* (*Medea. Voices*, 1996), is a work that indeed addresses the very logic of "repression, denial, and projection" (16) which Corti finds at the core of the Medea myth. Corti's thesis of a propensity in modern civilization toward a victimization of children deserves to be taken seriously. Despite occasional shortcomings, Corti's intelligent and often thought-provoking analysis of the Medea myth reminds us of disturbing truths, contradictions inherent in our value systems that continuously need to be reexamined.

Christian Rogowski
Amherst College

Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature. Edited by Werner Sollors. New York: New York University Press, 1998. x + 409 pp. \$25.00.

"In the past 20 years, scholars have come to pay much attention to race, gender, and ethnicity," Werner Sollors wrote in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (October 30, 1998), "yet they have tended to ignore language as a defining part of American culture." The essays collected in *Multilingual America* aim to change that pattern. Extending and concretizing multicultural scholarship on American literature, these essays address not only the themes of cultural identity and difference but also the linguistic fusions, substitutions, fractions, and contradictions by means of which these themes appear. The underlying syllogism of the collection, therefore, goes something like this: If language defines culture, and America is multi-cultural, then multilingualism is the ground level of American culture. Furthermore, if America is multilingual, and language is a crucial key to national identity, then American multilingualism may indicate an emerging transnational form of American democracy. At least, most au-