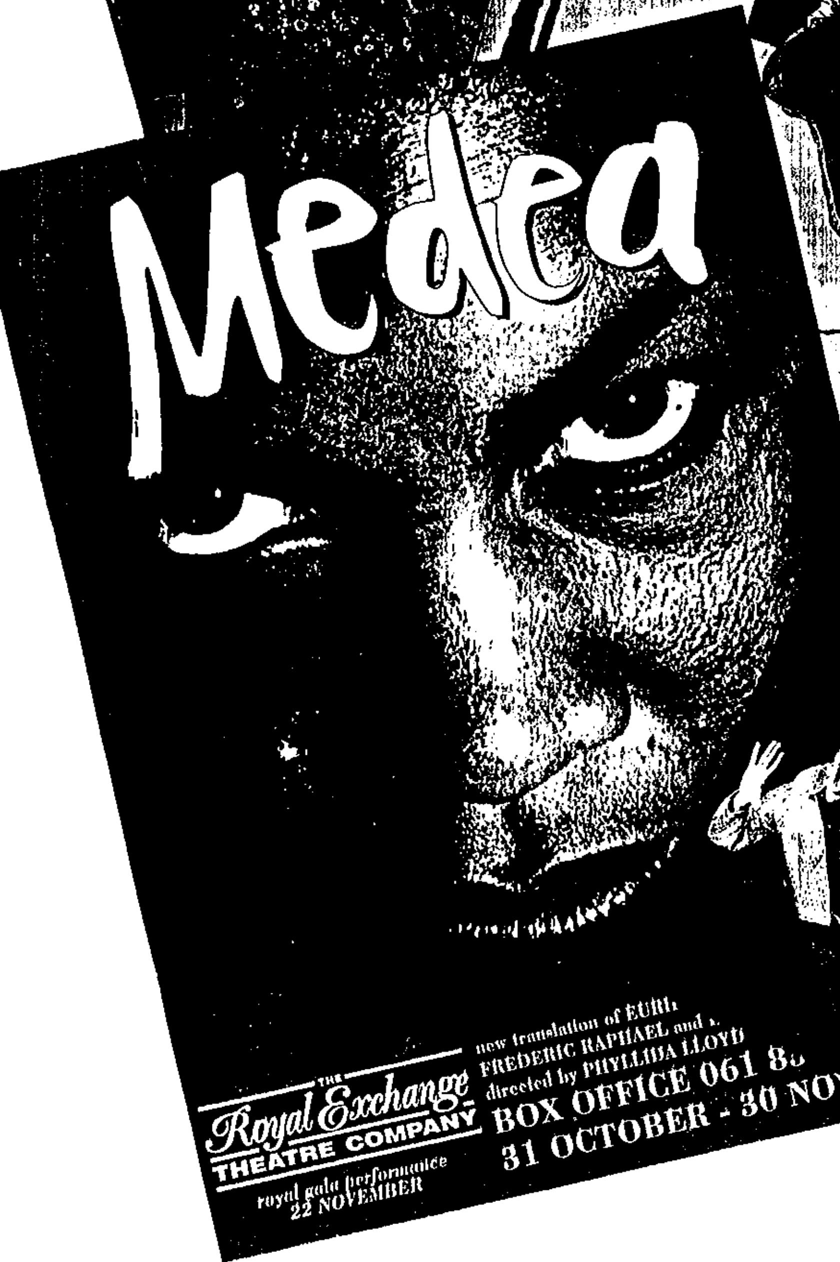
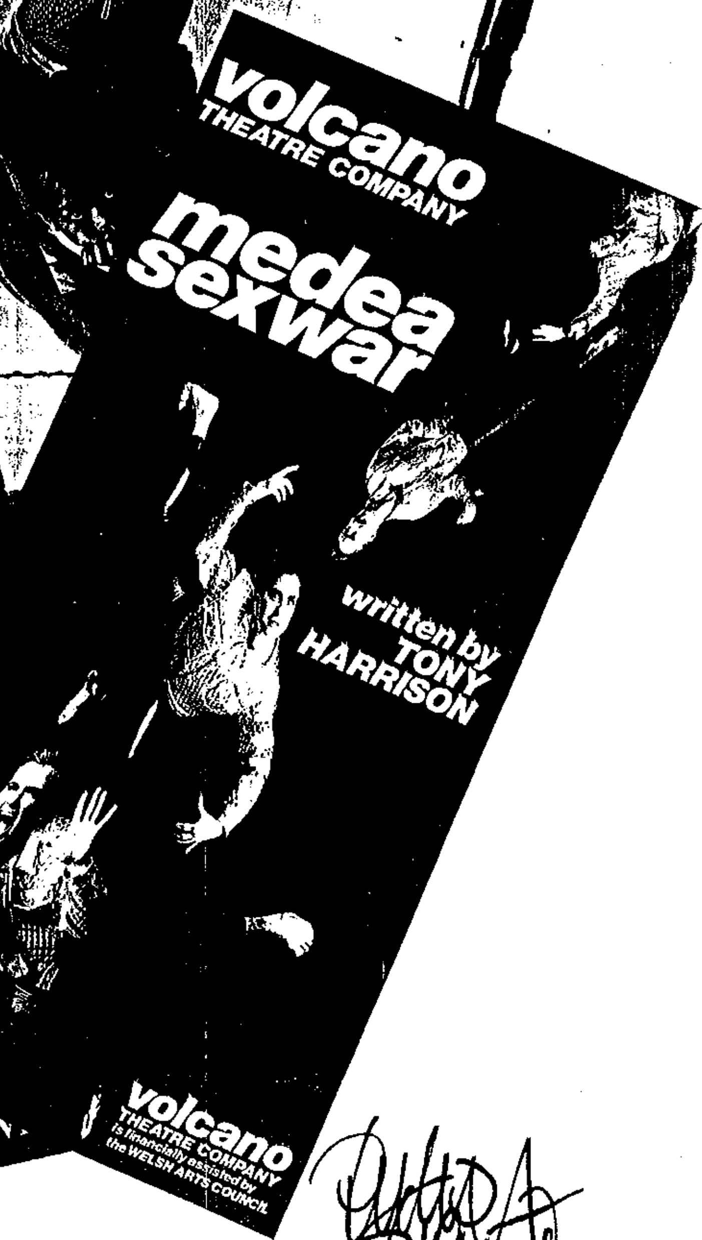
A Mean Medea





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A Mean Medea.

The pitfall which one must avoid in any form of commentary is that of using methods and knowledge (often assumed rather than proven) from other, and possibly inappropriate, disciplines. To attempt an extreme case of this I could suggest that prior to Agamemnon's return and murder, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus inhabited a realm of Schroedinger's space; did they co-habit? Or were they waiting to see the outcome of the return? It is fun to speculate, but in Schroedinger's space, neither happened - of course, neither did happen, because Aeschylus did not go into the question, and without Aeschylus the question has no meaning. In 'real life' one or another would have been the case, but the theatre is not 'real life'. But I cannot propose that this is valid comment because it implies that it is appropriate to discuss literary criticism in terms of theoretical physics, and it also implies that I know more about quantum mechanics than I do.

Having said this, I am going to suggest a parallel which sounds, even to me, suspiciously like the method I disavow. In science, especially non-exact sciences, one makes measurements in an attempt to establish relationships and then to test the relationship under study by drawing a graph; in an exact science, the points of measurement will be joined, and a mathematical relationship demonstrated if one exists. In the non-exact sciences, it is sufficient to draw a line of 'best fit', and the usefulness or otherwise of the purported relationship assessed by statistical analysis of the distances between the points obtained and their 'ideal' positions on the 'graph'. I imagine that this has proved, and is proving, a godsend to many researchers, since every set of results is capable of myriad interpretations. Whilst I do not suggest that the method can be applied in anything like strict form to the work of a dramatic poet, I do think that by looking at a variety of statements and interpretations, the wider ranging and more contradictory the better, one may be able to arrive at a concept of the original work which reflects both the poet's feelings, and its impact on an audience. That is to say, to arrive at a theory of 'best fit' which will allow for other views, provided that one realises that they are on the graph paper, but not on the graph. And so, in looking at some of the interpretations of Euripides' "Medea", I hope to find an average 'Euripidean Medea' - a *Mean Medea.*

Lots of Medeas

Why "Medea'? As with any such question, the converse is equally applicable: Why not? I have a special regard for it as it was the first production of a Greek play which I saw, and that was at Epidauros, performed by the National Theatre Company of Greece, it was a prestigious production, and I could not understand a word of it! I confess that I could not follow the plot, because I had forgotten what happened after Jason had returned to Greece from Colchis. Such was the power of the performance, however, that when I read the play, images from the production came into mind, and when I saw a production in English, having by then read the play in a number of groups, differences were apparent which made me uneasy. The second production was the translation by Frederick Raphael and Kenneth McLeish, directed by Phyllida Lloyd and its impact was as stunning as the Epidauros production, (directed by Andreas Voutsinas; translated by Giorgos Himonas - presumably into modern Greek), and I feel that the portrayal of Medea by Claire Benedict allowed an interpretation that was not made possible by that of Lydia Photopoulou. Both actresses were memorable, it is difficult to say if greater stage presence is required in the vastness of the theatre at Epidauros, or in the intimacy of theatre in the round at the Royal Exchange in Manchester (where half of the audience is behind the player), but 'presence' was the commanding feature in each case.

It was impossible to ignore 'Medea Sex War' by the Volcano Company, and then reading Tony Harrison's script can be said to be considered compulsory. This encouraged a view of Jason which is important, not least because it may be described as 'uncanonical' but not necessarily invalid. Finally, Monstrous Regiment's production shows how Euripides can be expressed as a 'kitchen-sink' drama, and by presenting a well acted and produced piece of theatre can reveal the inappropriateness of such a shift in time setting; Claire Venables' direction and Ishia Bennison's Medea did explore some of the issues attributed to Euripides, but one could not help feeling that in its context, the different legal system would have precluded the ending.

Phyllida Lloyd's production must be described in a little more detail. There was a chorus, this demonstrated the poverty of productions which make do with one actor representing the chorus, and they did employ movement to great effect; at the end of the play, there was no *mechane*, but the chorus seemed to raise Medea on high, and surrounded her with a ring of flaming torches which were probably as evocative of the sun as Euripides' chariot in the original. The chorus was of mixed race, predominantly coloured, and Medea (Miss Benedict), the tutor/messenger and Aegeus were negroid: the nurse, Creon and Jason were white. By accident or design, this gave a racial undercurrent to the play which I feel was not intended; the white characters were either tyrants or peasants; there was an identification of 'black' with 'women' suggesting a present-day political view which I do not think that Euripides would have recognised, and in some respects was negated by Miss Benedict, whose performance transcended colour or sex - for me and for others, she was Medea, and I am certain that Euripides would have approved and applauded (once he had become accustomed to the idea of women on stage). Miss Benedict somehow softened the image suggested by the costume designs which were Egyptian in flavour, and made one think of 'Black Athena' - perhaps intentionally. But by her very artistry, rather than her race, she managed to provide a 'racial' element which I believe to be true to Euripides.

The qualities which Miss Benedict displayed were shown by Miss Bennison, but in a different way, she presented as someone distraught to the point of clinical hysteria, and the air of seductiveness which she brought to the fourth episode (reconciliation) made her a Medea of whom I felt Euripides would be proud.

Euripides' Medea.

The predominant feature of the "Medea" may be said to be the Aegeus scene, it is central in more than the obvious respect; Medea needs a bolt-hole, and the king of Athens provides one. Aristotle did not like this, and if one takes as a definition of bad fiction: too much co-incidence, then one will criticise Aegeus' timely appearance. In his introduction to his translation, Philip Vellacott says that "The king of Athens and his friendly offer to Medea were part of the unalterable legend, and would be accepted as such by the Athenian audience" but one must ask if this is true. In the "Greek Myths", Robert Graves suggests the opposite, that is to say that it was an invention of Euripides, and like other features played no part in the original myth. So, in the interests of his purpose, Euripides has made Creon king of Corinth instead of his usual Thebes; Jason a suitor of Creon's daughter, hoping for advancement, rather than king of Corinth; and Medea the murderess of her children, rather than the citizens of Corinth. Indeed it was suggested that the Corinthians bribed Euripides to make this last change, implying that it was anything but "part of the legend", Mr. Graves seems to think that he may have been rewarded for such a 'service', but it is unlikely that the Corinthians would believe that Euripides was so influential, or that they cared so much; one might say that it would mean that they were agreeing to a revision of their understanding of the meaning of their annual sacrifices in commemoration of the 'murders'. Indeed, one must ask if the entry of Aegeus were of such importance, why did Seneca feel that he could omit it; it is true that he was not intent on glorifying Athens, but if he took as his model another play, now lost, then one must assume that the imagined author did not include Aegeus, and that Euripides was alone in his version. And that seems to lead one inescapably to the conclusion that the intrusion was part of a desire to present Athens as supreme amongst cities. To quote Mr. Vellacott again "for the solution of their dilemmas..........they all look to Athens", he is referring to "Heracles", "Electra" - and "Medea". In "Between two Worlds", the essay accompanying Raphael and McLeish's work, they say "The king of Athens is presented as a gullible buffoon", and this is how he is indeed presented, at least in this (their?) production; this made one wonder if they have judged Euripides aright. Aegeus is played as if he were a character from the pages of Joel Chandler Harris, and one half expected him to promise Medea that if anyone should attack her in Athens, he would "t'row dem in de briar patch!" By representing this king figure as a caricature the play loses some of its credibility, and one finds it hard to imagine that an Athenian audience would have tolerated it, on the contrary, it seems that Euripides would have attempted a more dignified figure; he was himself Athenian, and so was his audience.

The date of production of Medea was 431, others have drawn attention to this significant date, but on the whole they have not pursued this, William Arrowsmith in " A Greek Theatre of Ideas" says "it cannot be mere coincidence that a play like this was performed in the first year of the (Peloponnesian) war" and Sir Denys Page says that "the cloud of war was still a shadow in the distance" (quoted by J. D. Smart). But if we ask Bernard Knox's question "what did it mean to them (the Athenians), there, then?" (Oedipus at Thebes), then we cannot avoid the questions: How did they react to a chorus of Corinthians? (we must also consider the position of the chorus as being half way between the players and the audience - in some ways representing the latter), and: How did they see Medea? and how did Euripides see the drama? bearing in mind that he too was an Athenian, and in competition with other poets (in this case Euphoron and Sophocles). J. D. Smart has considered the question in a lecture entitled "Tragedy and History", and his conclusions are of great interest, but imply a readiness to make analogous connections which are tenuous; he sees Medea as a representation of Athens, Jason as a representation of Sparta, and, both in the play and real life, Corinth the catalyst for trouble; he goes on to suggest that the audience was meant to see in this, and possibly did see, a vindication of the Spartan case along

similar lines to those suggested by Aristophanes' mouthpiece, Dikaiopolis, in the Acharnians.

Professor Steiner (in "Antigones", Ch. 3) discusses the difficulties of studying any work in another language from one's own, and it is worth considering the difference between the approach of the scholar with the text and the audience with what can be called 'immediacy'. The former will discover layers of meaning which the poet has reached intuitively - and for which he will give his muse credit; the latter will gain a succession of images, one replacing another, and carry away an impression which is more likely to be dimmed by too much study than enhanced. Perhaps this is what Aristotle meant by catharsis. This is not to disparage the study in depth, much less the scholars, for this type of examination reveals the greatness of the work, but it is not the *raison d'etre* of the work, the plays were to be judged in competition by a random panel of judges who would not be men of letters (it is of interest that the average Athenian could feel competent to judge the competition, and his peers accept his judgement, it also says much for a quality of both the Athenians and their theatre which might be one for any age to aspire to). Tony Harrison discusses this in the foreword to "Trackers" and points out that as in the case of Shakespeare, Athenian drama was not addressed to a section of a community, but the whole, and that in these two eras in the theatre the greatest works have been written. The challenge, then, is to try to recapture the immediacy.

Many modern commentaries will show all too clearly the mark of their period in history, it is unlikely that Michael Shaw's "The Female Intruder" could have been written in a pre-Freudian time, and its insistence on male-female duality and male becoming female and vice versa seems, too reminiscent of the post-Freudian, Professor C. J. Jung, for objectivity; whatever virtues psychology may have as a means of helping the distressed, it is not a rigorous science which can be used as a bench mark in literary criticism. Professor Pat Easterling has pointed out that one must also consider the exigencies of the theatre itself in "Women in Tragic Space" and the difficulties in drawing conclusions which might be apparent in a thesis where everything is well delineated, but which may be rendered inappropriate by the medium (in this case the open-air theatre). It is of interest and importance to consider the place of men and women in fifth century Athens, but our conclusions will depend on our own prejudices, and the Athenians were probably more aware of these differences, but less conscious of them; that is to say, they accepted them as part of the natural order and it did not occur to them to contemplate any other. Aristotle said in the Politics that the freeman rules the slave as the man rules the woman and St. Paul seems to have accepted this as being unquestionable, though he used a different analogy. It is we who are questioning new roles. And if we see the influence of the Sophists, it might be salutary to consider the heated debate in the streets of Athens today at general election time and compare it with our own approach before suggesting a form of "mannerism" in Euripides.

Euripides was following convention in writing the "Medea" inasmuch as he took personages from history - history in his sense, that is, though we might call it mythology. As Dr. Bernard Gredley has pointed out, the myths were "open", that is to say, they were capable of interpretation and alteration, there was no fixed written form. But he was living in his present and though he need not have been making a conscious effort to mirror those times, they would impinge on him. Professor Tolkein was criticised for making his "epic" work "The Lord of the Rings" an analogy of the second world war, but in the introduction he says "An author cannot remain wholly unaffected by his experience....." and goes on to say that "allegorical significance" can be found when it is not present, particularly, one supposes, if it is sought. It might, therefore, be natural to set the play in Corinth; Corinth was in everyone's mind, and Medea should have been a popular subject for the

theatre. In another context, Jasper Griffin has described the "hero" as someone "just on the other side of the hill", remote, but accessible; but - Medea! She could be presented as exotic to the point where she was scarcely recognisable; Colchis was not just on the other side of Dr. Griffin's hill, she was from another world, we could almost say the world of science fiction - another planet. One can imagine the Athenian (male) in his anticipation: something to be seen and relished, but enjoyed vicariously - as in the theatre - not for touching. She was a bit of Turkish Delight - but everyone knew that she did not have a soft centre! (I do not think that this is quite the same thing as Professor Gould's "fantasy"). At the beginning of the play, the chorus express sympathy for Medea, but it is unlikely that the audience saw this as evidence for her assimilation; rather that the chorus is composed of women, and what is more, Corinthian women; their sympathy said more about them than her, after all, the Corinthians were the cause if the immediate trouble with Sparta. If, as Medea complains, men can divorce women at will, is this likely to cause outrage among the audience? Medea ought to have been grateful to have been brought to Greece, and this is what Jason tells her. But it was a pity for her that it was only Corinth.

Jason is worth studying in the light of the Volcano production; "Medea Sex War" is based on Tony Harrison's work, and this is more like Seneca, in that it does not include Aegeus. The 'story' starts with the voyage of the Argonauts and the best modern parallel which comes to mind is that of a rugby club outing; a few crates of ale in the boot of the coach, leave the women behind, have a few adventures, have a few women, and bring back a stolen 'trophy' for the club-house. This may have been the view of Jason, he was from the other side of the hill, picaresque; in some ways like Medea, he could provide vicarious enjoyment for the audience. His association with Corinth is bound to lead to trouble, there should be a government warning "Living in Corinth can seriously damage your Health", but he has the naivete of the typical Greek hero and the unconscious self-confidence. But that does not make him into the limp character of the Phyllida Hunt or Claire Venables productions.

If Aegeus seems detached, this would be acceptable; why should an Athenian, especially a king, become involved in the affairs of the Corinthians (if the Athenians did get involved in everyone else's affairs, they themselves did not see it that way) but his purpose was to show that Athens was above all such petty squabbling and would keep her gates open to suppliants of any description, even Medea. The chorus comes to the conclusion that Athens really is the best place, it is as if the audience have won them round, unlike the real life Corinthians,; they have come to their senses. Medea's crime is shocking, but Athens will stand by her promise - of course. The whole play becomes an exercise in self-congratulation for the Athenians; perhaps Euripides interfered with the myth too much, it might have been better to have left the Corinthians with the guilt of the murder, maybe he thought that the change would underline his message and the implication of complicity remained, the chorus had encouraged Medea in her disloyalty, and had known about the planned murder and had taken no steps to warn Jason nor any direct action to restrain Medea.

This explanation may reduce the play almost to the level of banality, but it may have seemed banal to the audience, it came third (out of three). Indeed, if Euripides' plays were rooted in the present as much as this one seems to have been, then it may explain why he had only a limited success, four victories out of twenty three entries (ninety two plays). They may be popular with us because we find contemporary messages in them, but the Athenians may have disliked them because they were not sufficiently redolent of the heroic past.

If Medea related to contemporary issues, can the same be said of other tragedies? The difference between it and comedy remains, but might the difference be one of medium rather than intent? This challenges the usual view that comedy casts the spotlight on current events and tragedy attempts the exploration of timeless issues by re-examining the past and suggests that it too examines the present, but depersonalises it by using figures from the past. This would support Aristophanes' claim to be as serious in intent as the tragedians.

The power of the "Agamemnon" is diminished by the climax of the trilogy; all that has been gone through has been suffered so that the Areopagus can claim divine right. To us the spectacle of the goddess coming to Athens to set up a murder court is not to be taken seriously, but it was appropriate that four years after the curtailment of the powers of the Areopagus some crumb of comfort should be thrown to its members; can we imagine the consequences if the Upper Chamber at Westminster were to be told that they could discuss legislation, but their views would be ignored - and they would lose their attendance allowances? (This is the only analogy which I can think of) Some status would, no doubt, be conferred as compensation; perhaps not a goddess confirming some vestigial status - but we are not fifth century Athenians. The play can be seen as a double exercise in self-congratulation and face saving. This play is mentioned by Professor Steiner in "Antigones" (p. 120) and he draws attention to the consecration of a shrine at Colonos with reference to Sophocles play; this is part of his discussion of the 'historical' nature of the plays, and he suggests that the plays "Ajax" and "Antigone" might refer to a contemporary debate regarding the return to Attica of the remains of Themistocles. The whole passage should be read, but one section will suffice "Paradoxically, it may be this concentration around a core of timely and spatial specificity......which gives the myth its supple durability", this is true for us, concentrating as we are on its durability, but we must consider that the plays were intended for a single performance, and that the poet would be aiming for immediacy rather than durability, and that the audience would be more concerned with immediacy (Bernard Knox's "there and then") than with posterity. One should consider the difference in 'theatre going': we can go to a play having read reviews, and even the text; how can this compare with play 'no.3' on 'day 3' of the Dionysia? The impressions would be of a different order; certainly, one's impressions of four plays seen over a two day period at the London festival of Greek Drama are different from those elicited by a single performance of "Medea" when one has only been to the theatre once in a month!

It is suggested that one must try to imagine the threat of war hanging over one's head as one watches "Medea", and that it is set in 'enemy territory'; what might be the results of looking at some of Euripides' other works? If we accept the date of 415 for the "Trojan Women", we are at another crucial date, the year of the Sicilian expedition. Alcibiades was in favour, and we can imagine the fevered excitement of his supporters: Nicias was reticent (Theucydides Bk. 6); Euripides does seem to be making a pertinent point about 'war', but the fact that there are so few men in the play would appear to have less to do with his supposed sympathy for women than the fact that the men are mostly dead! Professor Easterling (Women in Tragic Space) invites us to imagine "what difference a chorus of the opposite gender would make to a given play" and this emphasises the point made by Cassandra (ll.354ff.) that a chorus of Trojan men would be impossible on this side of the Styx. Cassandra (Euripides?) points to the loss of Greek life as well, but if she has a prophetic role in the play, she is still the one who is not to be believed.

Speaking to a male audience, this is a clear message about war, and speaking to Athenians one cannot help but avoid the interpretation that women can do well out of war; like Medea, the Trojan women are going to be taken to Hellas and enter Greek households; would the Athenian feel sympathy for Cassandra? She got the High King; for the matron Andromache? She got the (young) son of the best of the Greeks; for Andromache, the old woman? She got Odysseus, who proved irresistible to goddesses. Sympathy for the dead is excited most poignantly by the death of Astyanax; Euripides could have called the play "The Last of the Trojans".

Again we will take 412 as the date of Helen; Euripides seems to be claiming that the Helen in Troy was a phantom, this is mentioned by Herodotus as a story preserved by the priests in Egypt, so it may not be a pure fabrication by the poet, but after the failure of the Sicilian expedition he seems to be saying that the benefits of aggression are fugitive whilst the losses are real (ll. 700 ff.). Helen herself seems to be unconcerned, having been untouched by the fighting; her relief at being rescued from Theoclymenus and anticipation of returning home with her husband are paramount. Once again, the woman has done quite well out of the men's suffering, Euripides might have been saying to the audience "I told you so, three years ago!"

It is suggested that these are the emotions which might spring to mind to an illiterate Athenian whose education consisted largely of stories, first from his mother, then from bards in the Homeric tradition. He was living through events and did not have our benefits of hindsight. It is possible that Euripides' use of the '*deus ex machina*', which underwent some criticism, is a reflection of the fact that he too was living in the present and could not tell the outcome of events; like the answer given by the Delphic Oracle to a question about the outcome of a battle, he could only reply "vocatus atque non vocatus deus aderit". Euripides is popular and more plays of his survive than of any other poet, but the records tell us that he was not so popular with his contemporaries: his relative lack of success, and Aristophanes. Possibly it is because he was too firmly rooted in the contemporary scene to fit the expectations of his audience. His notable success, the Bacchae, was written when he was remote, in every sense, from the ambience of Athens so it may be that he was, at last, providing the required touch of the remote and exotic. This would be what the Athenians would want after the defeat by Sparta, and any message which it contained would be more veiled than I have attempted to suggest is the case in his other plays.

The City of God.*

It has been pointed out that most of Euripides' plays were not successful; but more of his output remains to us than of any other poet. It is possible that ideas of excellence change, but if an attempt at censorship was made, we would ask why such a change occurred, and when? The question of the transmission of texts is a scholarly one which I am not qualified to answer, but I feel that it is possible to discuss the preservation of texts, and this not quite the same thing. Storage of documents remains a problem, there are fears that modern libraries will suffer from the tendency of modern paper and inks to "bio-degrade", but it should be no surprise, as modern paper and ink are subject to the second law of thermodynamics! I am assuming that the works which survive are those of which most copies were made, therefore, for some reason, they were the most popular.

Destruction occurred in the early years of the Christian faith; this fact is regrettable, but cannot be avoided; there were other consequences of conversion, for example in Russia, pre- Christian art was destroyed, and a requirement of artists was that they should serve the new faith (a similar process occurred with the advent of a subsequent 'faith' in 1917) and though deliberate destruction is not the whole story, there would have been a concomitant neglect. I envisage an attitude of scholars, not a conspiracy, who wished to preserve their heritage, especially in Greece; some holding onto precious manuscripts and not telling anyone, but others pleading that there were Christian messages to be found in them. This idea is the subject of a book of essays by Simone Weil, "Intimations of Christianity among the Ancient Greeks", and not to put too fine a point on it , I can imagine a Greek (and especially an Athenian) saying "If God declared himself to those Semites, he must have had something to say to us!" and then looking for, and finding, 'something'. I consider that this was easy in the case of the Bacchae, and that it may have influenced Christian theology: By that I mean that Christ is portrayed as a messianic figure who resembles Dionysos more than any figure in the Hebrew scriptures.

I would ask, then how can Medea be presented as having a message for Christians? I have no definitive answer, but would speculate that Athens could be seen as a paradigm for heaven; this would not appeal to the Romans, but they may have been content with its cultural significance, but I believe that it would hold appeal for the Greeks. As a parable, it reveals how anyone who accepts the promises of heaven will be accepted; race does not matter, nor sex, nor previous crimes. Other parables suggest that there is more rejoicing over repentant sinners than those who also serve by standing and waiting; I confess that I cannot find any evidence of repentance in Medea, but a clever scholar might have convinced a less than clever inquisitor. I return again to the question of what I have called immediacy; now the difficulty is to put ourselves in the position of those living in a state with a state religion whose theology was still in its infancy - to such an extent that the Emperor had to call councils to produce dogmatic statements. Of course, this leads to a further question; are the "truths" considered eternal in the plays of truly universal significance, or is it possible that they have been incorporated into our culture and moulded our prejudices? If the latter is true, then it is not surprising that we find our own contemporary prejudices in them, and falsely ascribe universality to them. I should like to plead a case that this is the most compelling reason for studying the texts, most especially by non-classicists; they are not at the roots of our civilisation: they are its very essence.

*Title of a book by St. Augustine.

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