

The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558–1688.

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Medea, sorcerer and child-murderer, is a figure who has cast a powerful spell throughout the ages. Euripides's play that bears her name is the most frequently performed Greek tragedy in the modern era. But in early modern times, knowledge of her story came

largely through Latin sources, chiefly Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, *Tristia*, and *Heroides*, and also Seneca in his reworking of Euripides's play, at the end of which she departs in a chariot drawn by dragons in unpunished triumph over Jason after having killed their children in revenge. She is in part a romantic heroine in her love affair with Jason (the subject of the *Argonautica* of the Greek Apollonius Rhodius, untranslated in the early modern era) and, when thwarted, proves to be a Lady Macbeth figure who has the courage of her convictions. Indeed, the comparison between the two is one of the many fascinating discussions prompted by allusions to Medea in this wide-ranging, sophisticated, and scholarly monograph.

There are five chapters: "Medieval Medea," "Translating Medea," "Tragic Medea," "Comic Medea," and "Political Medea." Within each chapter the exposition is subdivided and chronologically arranged. A wide variety of material is discussed in prose narratives and drama, as well as all the more direct translations of source material. All texts are culturally contextualized; some will be familiar to readers of earlier literature, but many, if not most, will be new to most readers. Forty pages of endnotes and a twenty-page bibliography bear witness to the author's extensive research and her engagement with both primary and secondary material on the topic. The latter is often used to present debates about the status of texts and their likely relation to their contemporary audience; for example, in the case of Prospero's renunciation of his magic powers in *The Tempest* that echoes Medea's boast of her control of the natural world, is the audience expected to notice the parallel, to see the difference or think about underlying similarities? Critical response has varied greatly. The whole book in fact could be considered a sustained meditation on the intricate workings of intertextual literary allusion.

A powerful, violent, and transgressive woman who was a witch and a barbarian (in the sense of not being Greek) and whose crimes go unpunished in classical sources presented something of a problem in early modern times. Some medieval accounts suppress any reference to her crimes and romanticize her instead, or she is presented as a warning of what might happen if women are not contained. In Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, Medea's crimes of dismemberment and poisoning are often ghoulishly presented before meeting severe punishment at the end as the normative social order is restored. In political contexts Medea is associated in Protestant writers like Spenser and Drayton with threats to the integrity of the monarchical state from witchcraft, Catholicism, or civil unrest. The political context of the final chapter does not go beyond 1688, the date in the book's title. But a conclusion follows that looks beyond 1688, with a necessarily short section, "Women Writing Medea," concluding with Mary Pix's play of 1699, recognizing "the dramatic and pathetic potential of a comparison between Medea and a scorned woman" (195). The final short section of the conclusion, "Towards the Eighteenth Century," touches on the multiauthored translation of the *Metamorphoses* in 1717 and an adaptation of Seneca's tragedy in 1761.

In a series entitled *Early Modern Literature in History* there must a problem about where the early modern might be deemed to end. The editors suggest the date of 1740. It would have been interesting to know what happens to Medea at the beginning of the

Enlightenment. The introduction begins with a “Modern Medea”; it is as if there is a bigger book straining to get out. But the concluding sentences offer a fine summing up that is fully demonstrated as never before: “The lessons that Medea holds for the early modern reader or audience may be taught through a wide variety of genres, and their applications are both domestic and national, focused on both family and state. In all cases, though, somehow controlling or expelling the power she represents is essential, for it is the process of imaginatively mastering Medea that allows male authors to indulge in a fantasy that simultaneously pleasurably invokes, and reassuringly quashes, her famous threats to order and to patriarchy” (202).

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