The Tragic Life Story of Medea as Mother, Monster, and Muse

BY JANA RIVERS NORTON

Taming Trauma's Wake 2009

The Demeter Persephone Myth as Writing Ritual in

the Lives of Literary Women 2016

The Tragic Life Story of Medea as Mother, Monster, and Muse

By

Jana Rivers Norton

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

The Tragic Life Story of Medea as Mother, Monster, and Muse

By Jana Rivers Norton

This book first published 2020

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-4130-4
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-4130-6

This above all—to thine own self be true.[1]

—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*

[1] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*. In, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works,* compact edition, edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Act I, iii, line 78, 659.

CONTENTS

*

When I was young, I dreamed that a monster grabbed me from behind and no matter how hard I fought, I became a monster myself. As I matured, I learned how to give sorrow words, to speak of what was monstrous in my own life. Over time, my choice to act against maternal scorn and neglect, allowed me to see the past, within the light of present day. Lately, I have been dreaming of monsters again. This time, in my dreams, a monster is standing frozen in place, a statue waiting to come to life, until at last, it begins to lash out and ravish the surroundings. Cars are tossed in mid-air, children are crushed underfoot, buildings are demolished in a wake of wrathful woe. Fear suddenly rises within my chest as I stand on the sidelines. Oddly, I know that the monster is looking for me, seeking me out for retribution, and that I must face him or perish. All at once, I am stand inside a library as an elevator door opens and the monster beckons me near. I step forward and take his outstretched hand. I am terrified, not knowing if I will survive. The elevator stops on the second floor and I sit among a sea of books. I look at the monster. His face is seething with rage. The monster speaks, "tell me about loss." At first, I give an academic answer. My words, however, infuriate him. I begin again, this time I share my own life story of betrayal and abuse. Suddenly, the monster's eyes fill with sadness. I am no longer afraid. I am back outside. The monster is gone, his fury abated.

*

PREFACE

But noble again, proud, straight and silent, crimson-cloaked / In the blood of our wounds.[2]

—Robinson Jeffers*, Medea*

The Tragic Life Story of Medea as Mother, Monster, and Muse retells the tale of the mythic figure of Medea as emblem for the destructiveness of unresolved sorrow turned to fury. Although told in vast and divergent ways from antiquity to present day, the most popular telling of Medea's story is of a love-sick maiden who suffers from unrequited love and devotion. Universal in all versions of the story, however, is Medea as the esteemed daughter of King Aeetes of Colchis, gifted in the art of herbal potions and incantations, who holds special knowledge of rituals and magic. In Medea's hands, "all the herbs that grow on land and all that live in the salt sea become drugs and charms. She can call forth blazing fires. She can quiet rushing rivers."[3]

Medea is highly skilled in the art of alchemy and can revitalize dead and mutilated flesh. She is well versed in the cycles of creation and symbolizes three transitional phases of a woman's life from birth to development, to maturity and reproductivity, into decline and death. Her origins are gynocentric, reaching back to a pre-patriarchal period when female potency was revered as a source of empowerment.[4] Early mythic narratives reveal Medea as an earth goddess, who embodies the energies of the earth, sky, as well as the underworld. Hence, she is often connected to the archaic pattern of sacrificing the king to ensure the fertility of the land associated with matriarchal societies and ceremonies.[5]

---

[2] Robinson Jeffers, *Medea: Freely Adapted from the "Medea" of Euripides* (London: Samuel French, Inc., 1976), lines 60-61.

[3] "Jason and the Golden Fleece." In, *World Mythology: An Anthology of the Great Myths and Epics*, 3rd ed., edited by Donna Rosenberg (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Publishing, 1999), 183.

[4] See Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 84-109, for a discussion of the primacy of mothers in antiquity.

[5] "Jason and the Golden Fleece." In, *World Mythology*, 162-163.

Yet, over time, the myth of Medea has adopted a dichotomous world view that de-emphasizes her life-giving propensities. Rather than being an empowering goddess, Medea now possesses a dual nature. When honored she is fiercely loyal, but when scorned, her revenge is deadly. Though powerful and proud, once betrayed, her talents turn diabolical. Many stories depict Medea as strong and autonomous, however, her susceptibility to the misfortunes of love is legendary. Myths from the Colchian and Corinthian cultures, tell of Eros piercing Medea's heart as she falls madly in love with Jason, who, along with the Argonauts, arrive upon the shores of Colchis, her father's kingdom in quest of the golden fleece.[6]

> She had stood silent and still, for the sight of this stranger had flooded her eyes, and the godlike beauty of his face and form had caused her heart to flood with waves of love and longing.[7]

She soon assists Jason by concocting charms and ointments that make him invincible. When Jason succeeds in wrestling the sacred ram, symbol of royal prowess, away from her father, he promises to marry her. However, due to Medea's treasonous acts, she becomes a cast away, and together, they flee the city. They marry, have two sons, and live together as exiles in the town of Corinth.[8] For ten years they dwell there, Medea a devoted wife and mother; Jason, a father and husband. Over time, however, Jason is enticed by political ambition, and hatches a plan to marry the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth, and abandon Medea.

In response, Medea will have nothing of it. Once she hears of Jason's plans, she conjures a murderous plot, first against Creon and the kingdom of Corinth, next, against Jason for his cruelty by killing their two sons. Medea, once wonderous and magical, now a wounded wife, is unable to curb her fury. As a result, she unleashes unspeakable horror upon human flesh rather than accept the truth and move forward in life.[9] Instead, she is consumed by a monstrous mentality, a troubling sign of an inner tumult

---

[6] See Fritz Graf, "Medea, The Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well- Known Myth." In, *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*, edited by James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 21-43. Graf identifies five distinct yet often overlapping episodic narratives of Medea, that take place at specific locations.

[7] Ibid.

[8] See Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 1942), 123-130.

[9] See George Levine, "Frankenstein and the Tradition of Realism." In, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein,* edited by J. Paul Hunter (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1996), 209, on a discussion of moral action and depravity.

borne from heartache and desperation.[10] Hence, her tragic life story models the dire consequences of unresolved trauma. Her sorrow and rage are part and parcel of a classic flight or fight response.[11]

Yet, Medea's predicament is complex. The contradictory aspects of her multi-faceted personality, in many renditions, unfolds a disturbing trend of social marginalization and human disenfranchisement that is essential to understanding her life story. Also present is the ancient motif of woe transmuted as wrath as a tragic ingredient that shapes her identity and identifies the precarious psychic boundaries, she is willing to cross once grief consumes her. Corresponding elements of marriage, mothering, and mayhem, restrictive gender norms, social inequities and strife, as well as egregious familial and patriarchal influences, compel a closer more empathic reading. Despite the choices she is given and makes, her sense of isolation interferes with her ability to form healthy attachments, to find her rightful place in the world, as well as her failure to gain insights from her anguish and its outer manifestations. What, for instance, are the psychological impulses that coerce her transformation from mother to monster? Is Medea merely a flawed by-product of distorted familial and social conventions, or damaged by marital traditions that promote a splintered, destabilized self? Is she mentally ill thus unable to control her demonic impulses? Conversely, does she knowingly and savagely strike out at those who wound her without justification or excuse?

The Tragic Life Story of Medea as Mother, Monster, and Muse presents the archetypal figure of Medea as portrayed from ancient to contemporary times, as a means for addressing these philosophical questions, for clarifying her mythic autobiography, and its metaphorical unfoldment. In this book, Medea is seen in both her positive and negative aspects of ancient mother and muse as well as the embodiment of overwhelming sorrow and abuse. Yet, it is Medea's ability to unleash unspeakable fury upon others to do harm, rather than to accept what is wounded in her own life, that is most alarming. In this regard, her conscious choice to disavow her own maternal impulses rather than transmute her anguish into a regenerative matrix of self-enlivenment, takes on special significance. Though of noble birth, she is a criminal of love and becomes derailed by loss and the cruelty of being pushed aside for a younger woman after many years of devoted service to her husband—a devastating loss that can and does consume her heart with malcontent. Hers, as Martha C. Nussbaum notes, is a fury wrought from an

[10] Kirk J. Schneider, *Horror and the Holy: Wisdom Teachings of the Monster Tale* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1993), 40.

[11] See Steve Haines, *Trauma is Really Strange* (London, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016).

"intense, unabated love" that spawns emotional upheaval.[12] It is precisely her choice to embrace rage rather than resilience—destruction rather than dignity--that seals her fate.

Yet, how does Medea's ancient life story relate to our own? From a western patriarchal perspective, to tell one's story, whether mythic or lived is a solitary act that often refers to no other than the individual telling the story, whose identity is autonomous, independent, separate. Feminist scholars, however, have recently revised western notions of autobiography because it leaves out, as Susan Stanford Friedman asserts, the process of individuation for women and minorities. These scholars have attempted to expand the boundaries of what constitutes autobiography by reframing how it is perceived.[13] Wong contends that women's autobiographical narratives, unlike men's are cyclic rather than linear, communal rather than individual, hence they are relational and inter-subjective.[14] This inter-subjectivity-or the understanding of one's life by way of another, allows for a more expansive and complete articulation of the stories told.

The act of writing autobiography as the story of one's life as seen from Medea's point of view, therefore becomes a public rather than private act, a dialogical process of interaction—a symbolic and active encounter between self and other within a dynamic of creative thought and expression. Narratives of self, as embodied in the myth of Medea, in this way, are co-constructed within a culturally shared milieu, that indicates the significance of human thought and language to depict experience. The myth of Medea, framed accordingly, may play a pivotal part in the formation of identity and existential purpose by retelling her life story to create meaning and significance in our own lives. By reorganizing her mythic past, we may explain our present and make way for our future as a collaboration of self-efficacy, and a collectively process of procedural and connected knowing.[15]

The telling of Medea's life story as she imagines herself into being, becomes a purposeful exchange between the self, the audience, and other

---

[12] Martha C. Nussbaum, "Serpents in the Soul: A Reading of Seneca's Medea." In, *Medea: Essays on Medea*, 224.

[13] Susan Stanford Friedman, "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice." In, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings,* edited by Shari Benstock (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 34-62.

[14] H. D. Wong, *Sending My Heart Back Across the Years: Tradition and Innovation in Native American Autobiography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 173.

[15] R. G. Dean, "A Narrative Approach to Groups." In, *Clinical Social Work Journal 26* (1998), 23-37. See also F. M. Connelly and D. J. Clandinin, "Stories of Experience and Narrative Inquiry" *Educational Researcher 19* (1990), 2-13.

various identities that emerge. A careful analysis of the mythic Medea as a model for a life equally blessed and betrayed within westernized culture and cognition, and its continued subjugation of women and children, yields a contemporary exploration of how her life, mirrors the lives of those perpetually marginalized, whose mental and emotional status make them vulnerable to manipulation and neglect. This in turn may help us appreciate our own conflicting motivations, to grasp Medea's enduring legacy as a symbolic touchstone, as well as a beacon for our own self-reflection and redefinition, during difficult yet crucial crossroads in life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Eternal gratitude and love to my husband, Jack whose support and encouragement in writing this book, was and remains, essential. I would like to express my appreciation to Professor Mark Alan Graves, Department of English, Communications, Media, and Languages, Morehead State University, as well as Hannah Huber, Postdoctoral Research Associate, at the University of Chicago for their gracious reviews of the book. Additionally, I want to thank the staff at Humboldt State University, Arcata, California, for their assistance in completion of the manuscript, particularly, Cycil Oberlander, Head Librarian.

Excerpts from letters, poems, and other text by Edna St. Vincent Millay courtesy of Holly Peppe, Literary Executor, The Millay Society (millay.org). Excerpts include "Invocation to the Muses" and "Memory in England," *Make Bright the Arrows: 1940 Notebooks,* Harper & Brothers Publishers © 1940. "The Singing-Woman from the Wood's Edge," "Thursday," and "First Fig," *A Few Figs from Thistles: Poems and Sonnets,* Harper & Brothers © 1922. "Scrubs" and "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems,* Harper & Brothers © 1923. "Grown Up," "Eel-Grass," "Journey," "Poet and His Book," "Assault," "Song for Second April," "Mariposa," "Ode to Silence," "Spring," "Wild Swans," "Weeds," and "And you as well must die," *Second April,* M. Kennerley © 1921. "Renascence," and "Time does not bring relief," in *Renascence and Other Poems,* Harper & Brothers © 1917. "Witch-Wife," "To Kathleen," and "Three Songs of Shattering," *Edna St. Vincent Millay: Early Poems* (Penguin 1998). "Northern April," "The Buck in the Snow," "Dirge without Music," and "The Anguish," *The Buck in the Snow,* Harper & Brothers ©1928. "To hold secure the province of Pure Art," "Ragged Island," "Journal," "Establishment is shocked," "It is the fashion now to wave aside," "An Ancient Gesture," "I will put chaos in fourteen lines," and "Steepletop I," *Mine the Harvest: A Collection of New Poems*. Harper & Brothers © 1954. "Above These Cares," "The Death of Autumn," "Valentine," "Childhood is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies," and "Sonnet," in *Wine from These Grapes,* Harper & Brothers © 1934. "Underground System," and "(1928)" *Huntsman What Quarry?* Harper & Brothers © 1939. "Oh, sleep forever in the Latmian Cave" and "I dreamed I moved among the Elysian fields," *Fatal Interview: Sonnets,* Harper &

Brothers ©1931. "Cherish you this," and "The light comes back with columbine, she brings," *Collected Poems*, Harper & Row © 1956. Excerpts from miscellaneous letters from *The Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay* edited by A. R. Macdougall, Harper & Brothers © 1982. "Tea for the Muse," *Distressing Dialogues*, Harper & Brothers ©1924, and excerpts from Holly Peppe, "Introduction," to *Edna St. Vincent Millay: Early Poems* (Penguin Books, 1998). Additionally, excerpts from the unpublished manuscripts from the *Edna St. Vincent Millay Papers,* housed at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., courtesy of Holly Peppe, Literary Executor, The Millay Society (millay.org). Manuscript excerpts include, "Rosemary," June 29, 1908, MSS 32920, Box, 14; "Queen of the Dish-Pan," 1908-1910; "Poetical Works of Vincent Millay, MSS 32920, Box 94, vol. 2; "To Live Alone," MSS 32920, Notebook 6, 91-94; "Ole Mammy Hush Chile," vol. 1, 1907-1911, MSS 32920, Box 94; "Vincent Millay-Her Book," January 10, 1913, MSS 32920 Box 94, vol. 6; "Thoughts of any Poet at a Family Reunion," MSS 32920, Box 68; "Letters from Edna St. Vincent Millay to Arthur Hooley," dated October 6 and November 15, 1915, MSS 32920 Box 78.

Appreciation to Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company for permission to reprint excerpts from several works by Ellen Glasgow. Excerpts from THE WOMAN WITHIN: An Autobiography by Ellen Glasgow. Copyright © 1954, renewed by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Excerpts from THE SHELTERED LIFE by Ellen Glasgow. Copyright © 1938, 1932 by Ellen Glasgow and renewed 1966, 1969 by First and Merchants National Bank of Richmond, Executor. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Excerpts from VEIN OF IRON by Ellen Glasgow. Copyright ©1935 by Ellen Glasgow and renewed 1963 by First and Merchants National Bank of Richmond, Executor. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Excerpts from LETTERS OF ELLEN GLASGOW. Copyright ©1958 by Irita Van Doren and Frank Vigor Morley for the Estate of Ellen Glasgow and renewed 1986 by Franchon R. Rouse, Janet Rouse Schwartz, and James Blair Rouse. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved. Excerpts from BARREN GROUND by Ellen Glasgow. Copyright © 1925, 1933 by Ellen Glasgow and renewed 1953, 1961 by First and Merchants National Bank of Richmond, Executor. Reprinted by permission of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. All rights reserved.

Gratitude to Mr. Lindsay Jeffers and to the Jeffers Literary Properties for their warm reception and permission to reprint excerpts from *The Selected Letters of Robinson Jeffers: 1897-1962*, edited by Ann N. Ridgeway originally published by Johns Hopkins Press © 1968. *Medea: Freely Adapted From the "Medea" of Euripides,* originally published by Samuel French, Inc. ©1946 by Robinson Jeffers, and the poem "Oh, Lovely Rock" reprinted in *Poetry Speaks*, edited by E. Paschen and R. P. Mosby, Sourcebooks © 2001. Gratitude also to Penguin Random House, LLC for permission to reprint excerpts from *Louise Bogan: A Portrait* by Elizabeth Frank, originally published by Alfred A. Knopf © 1985.

Excerpts from LETTERS ON LITERATURE AND POLITICS 1921-1972 by Edmund Wilson, edited by Elena Wilson. Copyright © 1977 by Elena Wilson. Reprinted by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Excerpts from "Medea," from SEVEN PLAYS, VOLUME III by Jean Anouilh, translated by Luce and Arthur Klein. Translation copyright ©1957 by Arthur Klein. Reprinted by permission of Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux. Gratitude also extended to Alan Brodie Representative Ltd, London, on behalf of the Estate of Jean Anouilh for permission to reproduce excerpts from the English Language translation by Luce and Arthur Klein of "MEDEE" (the "Play") by Jean Anouilh (The "Author"), published by Hill and Wang, Inc. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967).

"THE WALLS DO NOT FALL" by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), from COLLECTED POEMS, 1912-1944, copyright ©1982 by The Estate of Hilda Doolittle. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. "RED ROSE AND A BEGGAR" by H. D. (Hilda Doolittle), from HERMETIC DEFINITION, copyright ©1972 by Holmes Norman Pearson. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. BID ME TO LIVE (A MADRIGAL), by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), copyright ©1960 by Hilda Doolittle. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. MAGIC MIRROR, COMPASSIONATE FRIENDSHIP, THORN THICKET, by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), copyright ©2015 by the Schaffner Family Foundation. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. END TO TORMENT, by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), copyright ©1979 by New Directions Publishing Corp. Copyright © 1979 by The Trustees of the Ezra Pound Literary Property Trust. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. THE GIFT, by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), copyright ©1969, 1982 by The Estate of Hilda Doolittle. Reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp. BETWEEN HISTORY AND POETRY: THE LETTERS OF H.D. AND NORMAN HOLMES, by H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), copyright ©1997 University of Iowa Press,

ACT I:

MEDEA AS MUSE:
ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXTS

INTRODUCTION

HEART ON FIRE

Unhappy girl, shake from the bosom / This burning fire.[15]

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, *Book VII*

The life story of Medea as myth has been told by diverse cultures to captivate audiences across centuries with the story of a heart on fire with passion, yet misguided by the terror of her troubled nature as foreigner: outside the realm of her own true self, and at the same time, an abhorrent outsider to others.[16] Ancient and contemporary interpretations of the myth offer a profound composition of tragedy that abounds in western cultural traditions, as well as illustrates how myth, as a form of traumatic disclosure, informs the study of psychology, literature, and gender. The many faces of Medea, along with a retelling of her story, as depicted historically in myths the world over, provides a rich and varied sub-soil from which we may dig for the roots of our own personal and collective identities.

The Myth of Medea: Antiquity to Present Day

From antiquity forward Medea is seen in a multiplicity of ways from an array of perspectives to defy an easily rendered description or classification. The earliest representations of Medea from mythic narratives, evolve from folkloristic initiatory and foundation rites in Athens and Corinth that reveal ritualistic exploits of those who sought personal and collective transformation. They also present Medea as a paradoxical figure, whose divine powers both enable and challenge established boundaries and expected norms of gender and sexuality. Furthermore, Medea as emblem of maternity is associated with ritual renditions of the Cult of Hera that helped would be mothers protect children from disease and disaster until they reached maturity, as

[15] Ovid, "The Story of Jason and Medea," *Metamorphoses, Book VII*. Translated by Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968), 153.
[16] See Sarah Iles Johnston, "Introduction." In, *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth*, 3-17.

well as how to atone for their untimely deaths.[17] Yet, another variant of the myth, shows a darker, more sinister side to Medea as a reproductive demon or frightening hag, who murders her own children, and victimizes young mothers anxious over the health and wellbeing of their offspring.[18]

Over time, fragmented portraitures of Medea began appearing in the poetry and prose of Greek and Roman dramatists and bards. In the Archaic Period of Greece, Hesiod's 8th century BCE *Theogony,* presents Medea as a maiden-princess, who marries Jason, and gives birth to their son, Medeus. Her son later becomes the namesake of a nation Medes, as an example of a foundation myth to assist a community in tracing back its origins to a people and a place.[19] During the Hellenistic Period, the epic *Argonautica*, by the poet Apollonius of Rhodes, portrayed Medea as helper-maiden who becomes infatuated with Jason, the young and handsome hero guided by the goddesses Athena and Hera to right a familial wrong.[20] Pindar, in an earlier rendition, offers his audience the 5th century BCE ode *Pythian* 4 to chronicle the adventures of the Argonauts and their quest to capture the golden fleece from the King Aeetes of Colchis. However, Pindar's Medea as the daughter of a king, is more than a mere lovesick maiden who dabbles in herbs and magic. She is an alluring female oracle or muse, who chronicles the exotic fame and fortune of the argonauts and foresees the colonization of Cyrene.[21]

Euripides, writing during the Greek Classical Period, sympathetic to Medea's plight as a mother and abandoned wife, attempts to understand what forces influence her predicament, as she is changed by external factors, from a maternal to monstrous presence. Sophocles, contemporary to Euripides, emphasizes Medea's sorcery and knowledge of the black arts in the play *Women in Colchis*. Contrastingly, Roman depictions such as Ovid's "The Story of Jason and Medea" in *Metamorphoses*, sees Medea as a dissociative self, part forlorn lover, and part maniacal witch, who is victimized by social circumstances and overzealous passions, while Seneca focuses on the savagery of Medea as dangerous and deceptive.

Modern tales of Medea such as Maxwell Anderson's 1936 *A Wingless Victory,* depict Medea as an oppressed other to address racial prejudice in

---

[17] Ibid., 14-15.

[18] See Sarah Iles Johnston, "Corinthian Medea and the Cult of Hera Akraia." In, *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth,* 44-68.

[19] Sarah Iles Johnston, "Introduction," 14-15; and Nita Krevans, "Medea as Foundation-Heroine." In, *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth,* 75, 79.

[20] See Sarah Iles Johnston, "Introduction." *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth,* 5-6.

[21] Dolores M. Higgins, "Medea as Muse: Pindar's *Pythian* 4." In, *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth,* 103. See also Nita Krevans' essay, "Medea as Foundation-Heroine," *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth*, 79.

America as means to awaken social consciousness in the south. The poet Robinson Jeffers' adaptation of Euripides *Medea* in the mid-1940s stunned audiences with his presentation of Medea as an alienated and vindictive figure possessed by paranoia and madness in a post-world war milieu.[22] In France, *Medee,* first performed in Paris in 1953 by playwright Jean Anouilh, dramatizes Medea as a dark foreigner whose efforts to empower herself from suppression enable her to find personal fortitude and freedom. Toni Morrison's 1987 Nobel Prize winning novel *Beloved,* is a fictional account of an historical Medea-like figure, Margaret Garner, an escaped yet traumatized slave in 1856, who murders her children to free them from suffering the same fate.

Contrastingly, contemporary cross-cultural versions of the tale picture Medea as a feminist icon, a virtuous victim whose disheartened life mirrors social inequities, such as the La Llorona weeping woman and Hungry Woman myths told by feminist playwright and poet Cherrie L. Moraga in *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*, to serve as a cultural conduit for change.[23] The Chicano dramatist Luis Alfaro rewrites ancient Greek tragedy to bear witness to the realities of Hispanic female experience in *Mojada: A Medea in Los Angeles,* a modern rendition that captures the violence and cruelty of immigration across three generations of Latina women. Here, the image of a dispossessed Medea challenges the arbitrariness of culture, class, and race, to listen to voices of rebellion, and to promote positive action towards inclusion and respect, rather than steps that demean, exclude, and destroy.

Medea's Tragic Legacy

Regardless of the interpretation and telling past or present, the myth of Medea is often remembered as a tragic tale across time that is relevant to archaic and contemporary societies alike because it encapsulates themes of loss and longing and expands and deepens our understanding of relational helplessness and injury. The tale shows us the tragic consequences when the agony of grief turns to vengeance against those, we hold most dear. When personal pain justifies revenge upon those who have wronged us—to get even with—rather than to let loved one's be. Medea's life story teaches about the importance of discerning what is acceptable and abhorrent,

[22] See Louise Bogan's "The Modern Syndrome." Cited in Sanderson and Zimmerman, *Medea: Myth and Dramatic Form* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1967), 178-179.

[23] Irma Mayorga, "Afterword." In, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea* (Albuquerque, NM: West End Press, 2013), 155.

culturally deviant and not, as well as the role of repression and dissociation when overwhelmed by traumatic memories and events. These legitimate elements of Medea's legacy, though distressing, give us an opportunity for self-reflection and resolve by acknowledging, as the existentialist, Kirk Schneider notes, moments of "chaos and obliteration" that underlie the human condition, hence underscore the more futile as well as poignant episodes we encounter throughout life.[24]

Schneider's book *Horror and the Holy*, provides insights into monster tales prevalent in the western literary tradition. Although his analysis focuses on Dracula and Frankenstein, similar contradictory forces shape Medea's personality, as well as the all-consuming aspects of her fate as an exiled victim of emotional betrayal on the one hand, and a darker agenda to commit acts of filicide, on the other. While the contemporary presentment of Medea is as a repugnant abomination, filicide in contemporary society, as perpetrated by both fathers and mothers alike, is an all too prevalent form of familial homicide.[25] Mothers who murder their children are often suicidal and suffer from mental illness or psychosis. They feel isolated, even alienated because they lack social resources and support. They also may suffer from substance abuse as well as being victims of familial abuse or domestic violence, all to suggest that mental health practitioners need to be more attuned to psychological pressures existent in volatile populations.[26]

Moreover, recent psychiatric studies of filicide identify why parents feel compelled to murder their own offspring. Children are murdered as an act of altruism, to save the child from a terrible fate. Or due to psychosis or delusion on the part of the parent. Others may fatally harm a child as an unanticipated outcome of abuse, neglect, or as an aspect of Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy. Still others murder because their child is unwanted or is seen as a hinderance. Lastly, a parent kills a child as an act of revenge, particularly in cases of parental separation and divorce, when parents are unable or unwilling to balance oppositional forces in their own lives. [27] A

---

[24] Kirk Schneider, *Horror and the Holy*, 13.

[25] Sara G. West, "An Overview of Filicide," *Psychiatry 4*(2) (February 2007), 48-57. West examines the social ramifications of child murder from ancient Greco-Roman cultures to present day, to conclude that while a father murdering his child in ancient times would have faced little to no repercussions, contemporary westernized cultures find child murder as utterly unacceptable. Since "1950 child homicide rates have tripled." Over 53% of children under the age of 5 in 2004 (311 of 578), were murdered by their parents in the United States alone.

[26] Sara G. West, "An Overview of Filicide," 53.

[27] See Susan Hatters and Phillip Resnick, "Child Murder by Mothers: Patterns and Prevention," *World Psychiatry 6* (3) (October 2007), 137-141 for a discussion of

psychological understanding of the link between Medea's mythical aggression and classifications of Parental Alienation Syndrome (PAS), and the Medea Complex, a set of symptoms enacted when caregivers become emotionally entangled in feelings of hatred and revenge, may help deflect the disquietude of what Edward. S. Stern refers to as, "disordered domestic relations" that often produce neglect, abuse, and at times, the death of children.[28]

Duality as a Mirror

Dichotomously, however, the destructive energy present in the story of Medea is both terrifying and resplendent and resembles the existential dimensions of sacred and profane experiences as well as providing an opportunity to explore the subtle nuances of liminal states that fall in between.[29] What we have come to identify as monstrous is also sublime and represents a vast spectrum of life. Medea as a horrific presence, is symbolic for what is monstrous in each of us because she violates many socially acceptable ethical standards and principles of order and harmony. Yet, in many faiths, divinity as Creator/Creatrix is also a Destroyer, the one who brings an end to all life. For Buddhist this frightening presence is Vishnu, for Muslims, the Angel of Death. Unfortunately, the duality of the divine in this instance, has been used in western metaphysics to instill, as well as assign, an engendered divisiveness between male and female, good and evil, right and wrong, weak and strong, rational and not—rather than to honor the multiplicity of existence.

According to Carl Jung, the primordial image of maternity as archetypal in nature, is both positive and negative and is made manifest in a variety of ways and includes the personal mother or grandmother, stepmother, or mother in law, found in mythic patterns. As a positive force, the mother archetype in western mythos is a representation of all that is fertile and fruitful and embodies the human longing for redemption as well as for

---

familial homicide rates in the United States, as well as their classification of filicide into five distinct motives to explain causation.

[28] Yvanna Aires Gadelha Sarmet, "Medea's Children and the Parental Alienation Syndrome," *Psicologia. USP 27*(3) (Set/Dec. 2016), 3-16. See also, John W. Jacobs, M.D., "Euripides' Medea: A Psychodynamic Model of Severe Divorce Pathology," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* (April 1988), 308-319.
See also Edward S. Stern, "The Medea Complex: The Mother's Homicidal Wishes to her Child," *British Journal of Psychiatry 94* (April 1948), 321-331.

[29] Kirk Schneider, *Horror and the Holy*, 13.

experiences that promote wonder and awe.[30] Yet, in its negative form, the archetypal figure of the feminine is seen as ungodly and fierce, anything hidden or dark such as death itself, a defiled and devouring monstrosity seen as a terrible mother.[31] Archetypes as symbolic psychic patterns found in myths, legends, and dreamscapes, according to Gregg M. Furth, help psychic energy flow "toward a natural level, where a transforming effect occurs."[32]

Such a simplistic interpretive polarity of female figures from antiquity, however, has been recently criticized by feminist scholars for possessing biased thematic structures, as they pertain to mythos and the divine within Judeo-Christian belief systems. Westernized portrayals of the feminine tend to echo distorted views of women as either "saint or seductress, loving wife or castrating bitch, Mary or Eve."[33] Jung's dualistic essentialism, often inherent in psychological classifications in general, has also been criticized for its androcentric interpretation of masculine and feminine aspects of mental functioning.[34] For instance, Jung held that the archetypal energy of Eros as receptive and relational was dominant in women; dormant in men, whereas the energy of Logos as creative and cognitive was dominant in men; dormant in women.[35] Jung further asserted that the true nature of the feminine was to be nurturing, therefore he held that a woman's rational mind or "Logos" was accidental without offering any analysis of how ethnicity and family dynamics might enforce traditional gender roles and any

---

[30] Carl Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine,* Translated by R.F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 109.

[31] Carl Jung, "The Mother Archetype." In, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, second edition, Translated by R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 81-82.

[32] Gregg M. Furth, *The Secret World of Drawings: A Jungian Approach to Healing Through Art* (Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books, 2002), 10.

[33] Campbell and Erich Neumann, as students of Jung, are criticized by Susan Stanford Friedman for the polarity of their mythic theories. See, *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1981), 269-271. Other feminist writers within a Jungian approach such as Hilde Binswanger, Ann Ulanov, and Polly Young-Eisendrath have found Jung's theories applicable, albeit in a revised and expanded sense, as means to differentiate the psychology of women, as well as for transforming opposing impulses into balance as a part of the maturation process. See Ann Ulanov, *The Feminine in Jungian Psychology and in Christian Theology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1971), and Polly Young-Eisendrath, *Hags and Heroes: A Feminist Approach to Jungian Psychotherapy with Couples* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1984).

[34] Susan Rowland, *Jung: A Feminist Revision* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2002), 54-55.

[35] Ibid., 40-41.

corresponding social/familial rewards and reinforcements.[36]

The binary nature of these interpretations, while arguably limiting, offer a looking glass view of western culture. Particularly when subjective archetypal projections, replace what is real, rather than signal a need for the psychological integration of overwhelming and unresolved turmoil. Or when theoretical models fail to fully explain the behaviors of individuals alike Medea, who struggle to discover an authentic identity apart from the dichotomous parameters of a patriarchal milieu. Hence, harmful cultural overlays placed on gestational energies, such as the mother archetype, as simultaneously serene and tumultuous, arise when we fail to discriminate, and balance the complexity of our own natures, as well as our deeper more transcendent selves. Medea as a feminine archetype is portrayed as a despicable outcast terrifying and brutal, stranger to her own identity, yet she embodies the sublimity of life because she holds tremendous power to both subdue and transmute that which derides her. The dichotomy of Medea's predicament, as depicted in numerous interpretations, is a shunned exile without a homeland to which she may return. Hence, her life story reflects a sense of self-alienation. She fails to value her own intrinsic worth and seeks outer approval and esteem rather than taking the time to discover her truest, most unfeigned self.

This unbalanced and converse state, is also clearly illustrated in westernized apocalyptic legends and lore, as well as classical monster tales, often told as metaphoric prophecies when humans fail to live in accord with all things.[37] Thus, the Icelandic/Nordic *Prose Edda* speaks of the terrifying end of times when Odin, the all father, will die, and winter will drive snow in all directions, greed will cause brother to kill brother until the sacred bonds of kinship simply collapse.[38] In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the land becomes a wasteland.[39] Whereas within the biblical "Revelations," angels pour down wrath upon the living earth.[40] Yet, from the ashes of chaos, a fertile earth is reborn replenished and pure. This redemptive vision of psychic wholeness and planetary healing, despite its problematic and engendered traditions, offers a unique modality for the recovery of the

[36] Carl Jung, *Aspects of the Feminine*, 50.

[37] *Introduction to Mythology: Contemporary Approaches to Classical and World Myths,* 3rd edition, edited by Eva M. Thury and Margaret K. Devinney (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 151-154.

[38] Snorri Sturluson, "The High One reveals the Events of Ragnarok." In, *The Prose Edda: Norse Mythology*, Translated by Jesse L. Byock (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 71.

[39] Ovid, "Flood," *Metamorphoses, Book I,* 11-12.

[40] "The Revelation of St. John the Divine. In, *The Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version* (London, UK: Collin's Clear Type Press, 1939), 313.

subjective self as a part of the intricate web of life—to a being-ness connected to nature, and to the earth's regenerative energies.

Ancient myths of the earth's destruction as well as her rebirth from death and decay, are apropos to the mythic Medea, as well as to our own post-modern predicament, and to individuated human identities--tenacious and tough, though damaged--that may be revitalized despite unsettling episodes of anguish and disease. End of time myths, as monster tales, and the myth of Medea, encompass both our reprehensible and redemptive potentials. They are communal tales about human tribulation and transformation when fear and futility have constricted knowing ourselves and the world about us. Thus, ancient stories reveal the possibility for relevant change because they are guides for finding innovative solutions when we fail to question our own assumptions as a means for re-imagining the diversity of life in humanistic terms.[41]

Myth as Healing Narrative

Such empowering, transformative experiences foretold in ancient myth have persisted in human communities across time and are recorded in pre-patriarchal stories to chronicle our own emotional need for an abiding connection to place, to each other, as well as to the agony of its betrayal. The enticement of love's joy, as well as its anguish, when that love is unrequited, has deep psychological significance. Our relationships to others shape our identities, our awareness of self and family, as well as our perceptions of reality. Thus, it demands, and at times, consumes, our attention.

Early societies traditionally used mythic stories such as Medea's to venerate the cycle of seasons, to foretell experiences of tragedy and triumph, and to give instruction on how to find solace in times of upheaval and fear. Telling stories, to ritualize life's passage, by way of spoken and poetic formulas, as ritualized action, is compensatory, curative, and collectively brings a sense of reconciliation and renewal. The aesthetic re-telling of communal myths helps to ritualize the important stages in life and its inherent suffering to allow for acceptance of devastating events to restore emotional balance. Mythic stories chronicle and reframe generational tales of wonder, wrath and woe. Myths help us to discern whether to acknowledge, or to bear witness, to feelings of solace and sorrow, to voice embodied emotions, and to be more cognizant of the existence and integrity of all life, in addition to offering the needed recourse to face our most

[41] See Susan Rowland, *Jung: A Feminist Revision*, 60-70.

painful challenges.[42]

In Aristotle's *Poetics*, the dramatic and oral reenactment of mythic themes found in poems and ritual, enable audiences to purge any excessive emotions by witnessing tragic action.[43] For Aristotle, the creation of tragedy, epic, and comedy is an act of imitation. By imitating life, harmony is produced through rhythmic action and movement. As plot and action unfold, characters imitate life through emotive and cognitive means. Tragedy, as a form of poetic expression, allows for the imitation of human action and the demonstration of our moral temperament. Members of the audience vicariously learn how to avoid pity and fear and thereby live a less destructive life.[44] Tragedy, then, suggests a dynamic exchange of human action and response, to serve as a pattern for traditional storytelling across generations.

Further, in ancient Greece, the oral tradition served as healing compositions that recast intergenerational tales imbued with poetic and artistic creativity. The success of ancient poets was signified by their recitation from memory of a vast array of verses compiled from time honored oral traditions. Overtime, their poetic skills were intrinsically linked to the content and context within which each poet creates and lives. Hesiod's *Theogony* as 8th century BCE poetic form, praised the vital force of poetic memory lent to both rulers and artisans by the muses alike to justify and assert a unique vision of the world, to solve social strife, and to calm psychological pain and personal plight. To do so, Hesiod often called on Calliope, muse of eloquence and epic poetry. Her gifts of storytelling, as embedded within tales of cultural heroism and prehistory, were elevated by her use of poetic elements such as repetition, shifts in tone, image, sound patterns, and alternating rhythms.

For Homer the poet is called to "conserve living experiences and transmit them to posterity." Plato believed that memory and the spoken word, inspired from the muses, was intimately bound to immortality and was an essential element of authentic human expression. Cultural collective memory, in this regard, as a function of society, was often recited in poetic verse that allowed judges, rulers, and kings to sway public opinion, and to

---

[42] Besel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 335.
[43] See C. F. Alford, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992).
[44] C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, fourth edition (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1980), 69.

administer verdicts and decisions by applying appropriate laws.[45] The use of memory as muse persuaded audiences through oral performances and addressed aspects of social discord to restore justice by protecting what should not be forgotten.

Today, the retelling of ancient myth retains its significance as a symbolic means for change-- as an awakening sojourn towards self-maturation and discovery. As Irma Mayorga stresses, myths are human stories that contain metaphoric truths to reveal healing potential whether modern or ancient in their origins by bringing opposing forces together.[46] For many mythologists, essential threads are embedded in myths as universal models of support upon which human societies, from antiquity to present day, depend upon to endure the many difficulties and transitions of life. As personal, cultural, and universal foundations, myths help us develop psychologically within a safe and nourishing environment.[47] Or, alternatively, to question the status quo. According to Bruno Bettelheim, these mythic stories provide the structure and framework to make conscious human desires and anxieties, and to foster the development and integration of self.[48] Ancient tales, as living entities, are still relevant since they evolve over time with each new telling to accommodate and relate to, as the contemporary playwright Mary Zimmerman contends, thematic patterns of life and the living of it.[49]

Thus, the telling of life stories is how we come to know ourselves, others, and the world. Stories help us to make sense of, and formulate, experiences. Stories shape and influence personal memories to provide cohesion and coherence. Self-knowledge and self-awareness, as well as its construction, can be altered, both in positive and negative ways, in the process of creating and changing the stories that we live by because it changes the way that we view reality. This allows us to interpret and reinterpret events and experiences that affect us.[50] However, the disruption

---

[45] James A. Notopoulos, "Mnemosyne in Oral Literature," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association 69* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press, 1938), 468, 215-216.

[46] Irma Mayorga, "Homecoming," Afterword, Cherrie L. Moraga, *The Hungry Woman,* 155.

[47] Joseph Campbell, *Pathways to Bliss: Mythology and Personal Transformation,* edited by David Kudler (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2004), 18-19.

[48] Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Random House, 1976).

[49] Mary Zimmerman cited by Dan Robin. "The Odyssey." In, *Illuminations* (Ashland, OR: Ashland Shakespeare Festival, 2016), 42.

[50]*Narrative and Consciousness: Literature, Psychology and the Brain*, edited by Gary D. Fireman, Ted E. McVay and Owen J. Flanagan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

of our own life stories, memories, and identities by way of difficulties, dysfunction or disease, has profound psychological implications for those no longer able to construct or integrate a consistent account of moment by moment experiences, events and episodes of meaning, and can alter the ways we feel and think about ourselves and the world about us. The life story of Medea, both ancient and contemporary, yields perceptive insights into human nature, albeit highly unsettling, about how betrayal and revenge, as well as acts of vengeance, justified or not, unravels our own humanity to severely limit, rather than to expand, our own sense of benevolence.

Taking Medea's mythic life story to heart as an emblem of change, may assist us in seeking mental and emotional health. Archaic stories such as Medea's are integral to the history and systems of western psychological theory and practice. A profound link between mythology and psychology was discussed by both Freud and Jung, who understood that myths are effectual expressions of unconscious dramas or tensions that reveal the nature of the psyche. Certain myths and archetypal energies from a psychoanalytical perspective are enacted in a person's life when awareness is restrictive. A careful analysis of these mythic patterns yields insights into a person's behaviors, beliefs, and relationships.[51] Ancient and contemporary stories, as the contemporary psychologist Rollo May asserts, act as the supportive beams of a house, though invisible, they provide the structure which holds the house together.[52]

Epic tales chronicle the historical and cultural victories and defeats of a people--how heroes or heroines triumph over adversity--how unspeakable acts mar and mold us with harsh memories of lived events, and how tales of tragedy and truth, illuminate lessons of courage or retreat, as well as voice human adventures of celebration and delight. These heroic tales born anew in a contemporary context, validate May's beliefs that human experiences can and do extend beyond our current mental, emotional, or spiritual abilities, and often create a void in understanding. This void is a form of existential angst, yet, ironically it can help transform one's current mode of comprehension to promote self-knowledge and insight. Awareness of an internal void enables us to see that our lives, though acutely altered, have importance and are enhanced through imaginal disclosure. At moments of creative intensity, breakthroughs of insight and vision bring a dynamic reshaping of the conscious realm of experience. Acknowledging our subconscious potential allows for the enhancement of existence as well as providing personal, historical, and cultural perspectives—how human

[51] See Yvanna Aires Gadelha Sarmet, "Medea's Children and the Parental Alienation Syndrome," 3-16.
[52] Rollo May, *The Cry for Myth* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991).