



MEDEA IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

ALBREKTSON (A.), MACINTOSH (F.) (edd.) *Mapping Medea. Revolutions and Transfers 1750–1800*. Pp. xiv + 256, ills. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £83, US\$110. ISBN: 978-0-19-288419-0.

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Mapping Medea brings together contributions from a 2018 conference ‘Placing Medea: Transfer, Spatiality and Gender in Europe 1750–1800’. The change in title reflects the expansion of the study beyond Europe in a chapter ‘An Imperial Medea: Spain, Portugal, the Colonies’ by A.J. Lappin. He includes the reception of Medea in South American countries, especially Brazil.

The complexity of the Medea character has led to a proliferation of scholarship on her depiction in antiquity and in her reception in later and modern times. This is evident from the works included in the extensive bibliography (pp. 223–47). When yet another book on Medea appears, one must therefore ask what it contributes to this trove of learning. The positive answer to the question is that this compact volume deals with a period and with geographical areas that have not been covered in depth in previous scholarship. Another noticeable emphasis is on genre. In addition to the more traditional forms such as tragedy, genres important in this period, such as opera, musical theatre, *ballet d’action*, melodrama, puppet theatre and the burlesque, are considered for their treatments of Medea.

Why was the character of Medea chosen by playwrights, poets, composers and choreographers in the later eighteenth century in places as diverse as Moscow, São Paulo, London, Lisbon, Gotha, Stuttgart and Venice? The authors make the case that the figure of Medea and the different approaches to her myth reflect the uncertainty and renewal of the time. The decision to focus on the second half of the eighteenth century is based on the judgement that this was a ‘moment of change and revolutions in the western world’ (p. 12). The study considers Medea’s role as a migrant and rebel, crossing linguistic, cultural, national, temporal, spatial, aesthetic, ethical and generic borders. In exploring how late eighteenth-century playwrights, poets, composers and choreographers engaged with this iconoclastic character, the authors also offer insights into the reception process itself. Another interesting facet of the study is the evidence that comes to light of the negotiations between court culture and emergent metropolitan cultural centres, as well as the role of antiquity in national, imperial and colonial politics during that time. The underlying presence of the ancient literary versions of the myth in the tragedies of Euripides and Seneca and in Ovid’s *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* and their varying influence over artists of the period also come to the fore.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with ‘Medea in an Expanding Eighteenth-Century World’ in four chapters. E. Hall analyses the *Medea* melodrama, a successful new genre consisting of speech accompanied by music, by Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter and Georg Benda. She follows its travesty in Vienna and also Friedrich Maximilian von Klingler’s version, which moves Medea back to the Caucasus in his tragedy about the Colchians.

L. Nikiforova further studies Medea’s transformations in Russia. She deals with the performance and translation of French and German versions including prose adaptations. Lappin moves to a different part of the world and examines the role of Medea in the Hispanic and Lusophone sphere. He argues that some performances anticipated the postcolonial Medeas so popular in the twentieth century and beyond.

In 'Inverting the Barbarian' Albrektson also researches the Medea myth in the context of colonial expansion. Although Medea is presented as a barbarian in Euripides' tragedy, Jason was labelled as that in several versions in this period. This interpretation enhanced Medea as a woman who is a victim of male cruelty. However, by the 1790s Medea was once more represented as an ethnic barbarian.

Part 2, 'Local Interpretations and Global Issues: Ontology and Form', contains four case studies. Macintosh places Jean-Georges Noverre's *ballet d'action* as a pivotal phenomenon as it was staged throughout Europe and provided a radically different model for tragic drama. It was informed not only by Euripides, but also by ideas of the theatrical sublime. She argues that this enabled Medea's return to serious spoken drama in the playhouses of Europe in the nineteenth century. P. Dotlačilová's chapter on the role of costumes in Noverre's *Médée et Jason* analyses the visual representation of portraying characters on stage. She emphasises how the new aesthetic trends focused on the human body and its movement.

J. Krämer explores German versions. Interestingly he notes that knowledge of Medea was not always through familiarity with the ancient sources but by acquaintance with accounts in encyclopaedias. He deals with the versions of Gotter and Benda, where psychological sensibility dominates, and then discusses the rejection of sentimentalism in the tragedies of Klinger at the end of the century.

Z. Schweitzer brings this part to a close with 'Medea as Infanticidal Mother in the Late Eighteenth-Century Theatre'. She notes the paradox that a theme that involves violence on stage, unpunished regicide and maternal infanticide should have been so popular in England, France and Italy. She ascribes the success of plays based on the Medea myth at this time to their focus on the infanticide and endeavours to explain how the unpunished infanticidal mother could be rendered acceptable within the prevailing aesthetic of sensibility. She cites the examples of Richard Glover's 1761 *Medea*, where the protagonist is a devoted mother who kills her beloved sons by accident, and Jean-Marie Bernard Clément's version, where she suffers a bout of insanity, but moments after killing her children returns as a bereaved mother. Schweitzer explores the links between French and English texts and translations of the Classics and also concentrates on the interaction of playwrights of the period with Horace's famous injunction in the *Ars Poetica*, *sit Medea ferox invictaque* (l. 123).

The third part of the book consists of only one contribution, that by R. Lysell, 'Medea – Sorceress or Woman? c. 1750 and Beyond'. It would be impossible to summarise the post-eighteenth-century reception of Medea in one chapter. Lysell has a brisk run through several versions: Euripides, Seneca, Corneille and Klinger before he discusses Franz Grillparzer's 1821 trilogy *Das Goldene Vlies* in more detail. He sees Grillparzer's Medea as the forerunner of the psychologically complex figure that was to feature so strongly in twentieth-century theatre.

The importance of the volume lies in its detailed investigation of a period and its versions and aspects of the Medea story that are not well known. It thus sheds light on a part of modern reception history that has hitherto been rather overshadowed. In the introduction the editors go so far as to claim that 'in a very real sense, it is between 1750 and 1800 that contemporary understandings of Medea emerge' (p. 3). This is rather a large claim, but the research presented here provides justification for it.

The volume is amply illustrated in black and white. This is helpful, especially in Dotlačilová's 'Visual Narrative: The Role of Costumes in Noverre's *ballet d'action*, *Médée et Jason*'. There is an index and a useful list of manuscript sources.

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