Euripides’ Medea and the Male Gaze of Antiquity

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Abstract: Euripides’ Medea strikes modern readers with the vicious act of killing her own children, however, such portrayal poses a question on the role of authors/artists in deepening the stigma about women of the past through the creative process that justifies a distorted representation of strong women. This paper aims to explore the representation of Euripides’ Medea and how he created an uncanny effect to achieve a dramatic end that both challenges the patriarchal society and the unconscious collective image of strong women. Artistic representations of Medea echo the interpretation of Medea being a symbol of liberty; Eugène Delacroix’s bare-chested Medea resembles his Liberty of the French Revolution, which is one of his most celebrated works. The bare-chested Medea appears again in a painting by Henri Klagmann during the killing scene which happened off stage in Euripides play. The representation of the bare-chested Medea ignites a question of the link between males’ representation of women and the lack of decorum to signify a rebellious act. By tackling this link, I aim to map out the prevailed traits that attracted certain male artists to strengthen the image of Medea as a ruthless killer as inspired by Euripides’ play.

Keywords: Euripides, Medea, Male Gaze, Feminism, Representation of Females, Eugène Delacroix, Henri Klagmann, Male Artists

1. Introduction

Euripides’ Medea strikes modern readers with the vicious act of killing her own children, however, such portrayal poses a question on the role of authors/artists in deepening the stigma about women of the past through the creative process that justifies a distorted representation of strong women. It is true that the presence of incidents that involve mothers killing their own children is evident in many countries around the world, such as New Zealand, India, United State, and Iraq [1-4]. Any individual who hears or reads about such news might question why a mother would end the lives of her own children, which might coincide with what the majority of Medea’s readers have been trying to wrap their heads around. The bold act of murdering her own children turned Medea into a visual representation of the feminine power that went wrong or more broadly the tyrannical nature of women. By looking at Eugène Delacroix’s Medea (1838) and Henri Klagmann’s Médée (1868), it emerges that the image of Medea, as I argue, turned into a symbol that embodies the male gaze, which governs the interpretation of strong female figures of antiquity [5-6]. Painters seem to find such character a vessel for their own feelings toward women as a category that represents an opposition rather than reflecting the complexity of betrayal in a female psyche. This paper aims to explore the representation of Euripides’ Medea and how he created an uncanny effect to achieve a dramatic end that both challenges the patriarchal society and the unconscious collective image of strong women. It also explores the visual representation in two paintings by Eugène Delacroix and Henri Klagmann to highlight the lasting effect of Euripides creation of Medea as a ruthless killer. Particularly, it traces the progression of the image of Medea that turned into a symbol that holds ideological and social implications by first tackling Euripides creation of this character, second the role of the male gaze in turning this figure into an image or a stigma that colors the way strong female figures have been presented, and lastly examines the visual representation of the character across two paintings to draw a substantial map on the way Medea became a recurrent theme that is woven into the fabric of our contemporary imagination to denounce strong women. By doing so, the paper reposes the question of Euripides role as a feminist
writer and questions the Aristotelian aesthetics as it calls for their roles in establishing the male gaze within the Western literary canon to be re-defined. Euripides manipulation regarding the construction of Medea’s image of being the object of sympathy to being the object of resentment has been already observed by T. V. Buttery and Aristide Tessitore [7-8]. However, the extent of his impact was not measured in relation to the Aristotelian aesthetics and its impact on the creative process of male painters.

Within the 21st realm, Medea’s action was justified as a reaction to the way she was treated as an outsider, as it was highlighted in many literary adaptations of the play. Black Medea (2013) presents six American adaptations of the play that represent Medea as a person of color; the six adaptations are Jim Magnuson’s African Medea (1968), Ernest Ferlita’s Black Medea (1978), Silas Jones’s American Medea (1995), Steve Carter’s Pecong (1990), Marianne McDonald’s Medea (2013), and Edris Cooper’s The Tragedy of Medea Jackson (1992) [9]. All six plays employed Euripides’ creation to present a political discourse revolving race and gender, which goes against the interpretation of it being simply the “story of a Third World people and its disastrous encounter with the materialist Western civilization” [10]. It is not only the themes of race and gender that found solace in such creation, but also the theme of immigration as it was highlighted further in Marianne McDonald’s chapter “American directorial perspectives: Independence Day meets Greek tragedy” [11]. The theme of immigration was visualized in Ali Alizadeh’s Medea of Baghdad (2011) where he built his adaptation of Euripides’ play to explore a relationship between a university student, who fell in love with an Iraqi refugee. She left her homeland, Australia, to form a new family in Iraq. Unlike the Greek play, Medea of Baghdad is a monologue delivered by what appears to be a modern representation of Medea, who faces the audience directly to share the story of her past and what led to such situation [12]. The loss of her kids is stressed on throughout her monologue. From the previous over-review of modern adaptation of the play, it appears that contemporary adaptations are focusing on Medea’s struggle by having the plot revolve around a moment of loss (when the children are lost); no need for other characters. It begs the question about the impact of fictional portrayal of strong women as vicious, especially, when Herodotus take on the history that involves Medea did not mention her as the killer of her children; the citizens of Corinth are the ones who killed the innocent children [14]. It should be noted that many versions of Medea’s myth end did exist before Euripides (which included Medea being invited to be the Corinthians’ queen or having the Corinthians kill her own kids), however, it is Euripides’ portrayal that dominated the scene [15]. Regardless of the many versions of Medea’s end, the question should be: why did the focus shift to Medea’s revenge rather than Jason’s betrayal? How did she come up with such idea? It is possible that her interaction with Aegeus gave her the idea of killing her children to make Jason lose all what a man in his position desires to have, i.e. heirs. It is Euripides’ depiction of Medea on stage in 431 BC that established this particular end, to become one of the most famous among Greek tragedies [15].

2. Euripides Medea

Robert Graves insinuates, in The Greek Myths, that “the Corinthians bribed” the playwright “to absolve them of guilt”
as an attempt to ration Euripides choice of making Medea kill her own children [16]. Historical records indicate that there was a conflict between Corinth and Athens during 431 BC, around the time of Medea’s first performance, which indicates the possibility of Euripides’ attempt in altering Medea’s myth to please the Corinthians politically [15]. Such claim does not represent the real motive behind such portrayal of a mythological character even if it were to be true. Not to mention that even if he were to be bribed, his end made readers be either justifying her act or condemning it. Others argue that Euripides did this as a rebellion against the judges of Great Dionysia since imitating myths without any altering is “considered as obedience to the laws of literature” [17]. His attempts in altering the Greek myth might be interpreted as his way of going against a system that did not acknowledge him for being a different playwright than those who were admired greatly by the Greek audience and critics. His position as a playwright who was marginalized due to being different parallels the way Medea has been projected in his play. I argue that Euripides Medea does not only represent strong female characters within literature, but also characters who have been radicalized by authorial figures (or their male companions, Jason in her case) to get back at the system. Euripides choice of the infanticide is a creative choice to embody both a means of protection (protecting her own children from ideological danger by being associated to Jason) and an act of liberty (cutting all ties between her and Jason). An interpretation supported by her lines in the play when she says, “I must make no delays, and give no time for someone else’s crueler hand to slaughter them” [14]. Euripides surprises his Athenian audience, who would expect to see a noble hero in the Greek Jason and an irrational sorceress in the barbarian Medea. Instead, Jason (an authorial figure) is exposed as a selfish person, while Medea demonstrates superior character and intellect.

Euripides’ portrayal of Medea is complex and introduces many questions on the way Greek society treats outsiders and the way Greek males treat women (as objects or trophies). It should be acknowledged that Euripides version of Medea’s story is so influential within the Western literary canon as the story of Medea became evident in many Greek plays after his play, including Seneca (the Roman playwright), who borrowed his main outline for specific revenge plays from Euripides [17]. At the beginning of the play, Medea aroused the sympathy of the audience and Chorus alike by emphasizing women’s powerlessness in an unjust society [17]. However, later on, she asserts a masculine authority to demonstrate her own importance and position as a superior person by proclaiming her crucial role in Jason’s victorious return with the Golden Fleece [17]. This contrasts to the end of the play when Medea is finally realizing the true nature of Jason, who used her to secure success, by telling Jason that he is the one responsible for the murder of his own children because he was too selfish to notice their importance [14] [17]. Claire Taylor, in “Women’s Social Networks and Female Friendship in The Ancient Greek City,” claims that Greek women.

“have been marginalized both as contributors to, and shapers of, the civic community because they were not considered to be citizens and therefore could not take part in political activity. In fact, women’s place within the city has heavily stressed their (re) productive roles as mothers and wives of citizens” [18].

Such statement is echoed in the early part of the play where Medea spoke to the women of Corinth [14]. The tragic end and the way Medea was treated compared to Jason supports Taylor’s suggestion that “women may not have gained the same rewards as men from their social networks” [18]. Such suggestion is exhibited by reexamining Jason’s arch in the myth of the Golden Fleece and linking it to the way he treated Medea by deciding to marry Glauke, daughter of Creon, to secure a better social status linked to Greek royalty. Women are being used as social vessels to secure a faster male mobility within the hierarchical order of the Greek society. Euripides is placing the Greek society within a Greek tragedy as a whole by focusing on the concept of marriage and how “women acted as ‘bridging links’” in marriages allowing men “to have access to greater resources” [18]. Such commentary is not reflected in the visual representation of this mythological character in two paintings by Eugène Delacroix (1838) and Henri Klagmann (1868).

The dialogue between Medea and Jason at the end of the play presents what lays at the core of his creation; a scorned woman who has been radicalized by Jason to commit crimes against her own family and to elope with him to a land she has no connections with. The density and complexity of her characteriza tion is so strong that it eliminated any presence of Jason in most paintings that depict her. It is true that his existence is not important in relation to the visual representation of her story, but the fact that painters feel satisfied with focusing on her without any need for the presence of a male figure to project her story is a telling sign of how strong Euripides’ creation on the visual representation of Medea to represent female vengeance and to become an archetype of the ‘exotic’ femme fatale.

3. Male Gaze

The phrase ‘male gaze’ became the center of my examination of paintings that depict Medea since they mostly reflected what most male painters regard as a strong woman; a masculine body, strong facial features, and conflicting emotions of vengeance and fear. Although this paper focuses on two paintings by Delacroix and Klagmann, it can be said that they lay out two main elements that are the base for the visual construction of Medea: the narrative (which can be extracted from the background and foreground) and the appearance. Considering the phrase “male gaze,” the act of gazing “refers to a way of thinking about, and acting in, the world’” [19]. The association of gendering the act of gazing establishes the assumption “that observation can be cleanly separated from interpretation” meaning a gaze can be characterized as male even if the eyes were those of a female [19]. It is a “figurative gaze” that demonstrates the type of
authority that controls the process of rendering the identity of oneself in relation to others [19]. It is a phrase that sums up a statement made by Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, where she writes: "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth" [20]. The story of Medea and the way her representation has been treated visually by male painters demonstrate how "the female body was [and is still] a site of political" conflict, and in an extension the way images of female bodies turned to become "a site of oppression and struggle" [21]. As a symbol of a strong woman, Medea “finds her identity as the object of men's desire” through the male gaze [19].

No one exactly knows why Euripides created such end as there is no autobiographical evidence that can be used to point out the intention of the author to date, such as letters or diary entries. This makes the literature of antiquity be a deep void of endless interpretations as the authors are only shadows off entities that we cannot really prove their existence except by their writings or what others wrote about them. Hence, interpretations control the narrative surrounding controversial literary figures to explain their motives and actions. The females who performed Medea on stage seem to voice a new dimension that has been marginalized by the male gaze. Maria Callas, who performed Medea for the first time in 1953, stated the following about the female heroin:

“I have compassion for her. She kills her children because she feels she has no other choice, and because, being a goddess, she can remove them from this bitter and bloody world and enable her to join them in everlasting life. She kills so they may live in peace and dignity. She knows there will be no hope of that for them in this world, so she commits them to the next” [22].

A similar sentiment is voiced by Audre Lorde in an interview with Adrienne Rich while discussing an unfinished piece called “La Llorona” that tells a story of a woman who killed her three sons because she found her husband cheating on her with another woman; she referred to it as “it is the Medea story” [23]. She indirectly described Medea (in reference to her piece) as a woman who wants something “not because she’s evil but because she wants her own life [23]. The goddess status of Medea seems to be emphasized by those who favor Medea’s actions and acknowledge the ambivalent identity of Medea for possessing human and supernatural traits. However, the criticism applied on her limits her impact as it is processed within a framework of a patriarchal narrative that denounces the actions of strong women that do not embrace the angelic image forced by the male gaze. It can be argued that one of the focal points behind the domination of the male gaze in regard to this particular character is the way Aristotle treated her within the narrative of his *Poetics*. His *Poetics* highlights the role of emotions in creating the best tragedy as the quality of tragedies relies on the connection between the main character and the audience. Angela Curran explores the relationship between emotions and the process of interpretation by suggesting that emotional engagement does “hinder our critical intellectual reflections” of literary characters [24]. Even though her article discusses Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the analysis of Medea’s character questions the legitimacy of Aristotle’s foundational criticism of tragedies. Does the ‘Aristotelian’ aesthetics really “call for [a] genuine, independent reflection” as attested by Martha Nussbaum and Stephen Halliwell or does the Aristotelian aesthetics represent a male oriented aesthetics and hence explains why Aristotle did not give Medea any consideration? The concept of the male gaze might allow an answer for such questions.

Medea is a good case to examine the concept of the male gaze thoroughly as it represents a methodological masculine process men use to render strong female figures “both as spectators and as characters within works” [19]. Such condition calls for a reassessment of the way Aristotle’s *Poetics* is being treated within the spectrum of male and female gaze as his doctrines (as I claim) seem to feed the critical judgment against strong female figures of the past and justifies the existence of the male gaze within the critical framework. While reading the *Poetics*, one would have to wonder who is the audience of such foundational text; is it the society at large or his male disciples? Such perspective of the intended audience of Aristotle’s rhetoric establishes why it is important to revalue the way characters similar to Medea are being represented as it would help to eliminate the chain of aesthetical oppression female figures have been subjected to. It would help, also, to reevaluate the masculine discourse within literary and art criticism. On a broader perspective, it shifts the recognition of Aristotle’s assessment of tragedies being the center of the Western Literary criticism to being the foundation of the male gaze that dictated the destiny of female figures presence within literary texts since it is conditioned by an exclusion of females that defies the patriarchal view of women. Medea does not only reject Jason’s betrayal but also the supremacy of the patriarchal control over females (within the real realm and the fictional realm). Hence, Euripides’, Delacroix’s and Klagmann’s Medeas are not for the general public, but for the male gaze as such image is an ideologically charged one that “contradicts the deeply held belief that art speaks to and for all human beings” [19].

In chapter 15, Aristotle stresses that the character has to be ‘good’ but his second requirement excludes women from exhibiting any trait that he sees fit in his tragic heroes; courage and cleverness, as he says “But for this to be an inappropriate way for a woman to display courage or cleverness” [25]. Such statement controls the role of female figures within literary texts to be simply ‘good women’, which made Medea not be perceived favorably since her purpose in the plot is not to be a good woman (revenge and murder are not good traits to be embraced by a virtuous woman). Thus, she is not qualified to be a tragic hero as the category of tragic heroes, according to the Aristotelian aesthetics, is mainly for male figures. Aristotle’s view does serve the patriarchal nature of the Greek society as pointed out by Claire Taylor, who claims that Greek women “have
been marginalized both as contributors to, and shapers of, the civic community because they were not considered to be citizens and therefore could not take part in political activity” [18]. That was not the only comment made by Aristotle that would frame the presence of female characters as he continues by classifying women as part of a marginalized group in society that includes slaves insinuating that a woman is ‘an inferior being’ and a slave is ‘quite worthless’, he says, “there is such a thing as a good woman and a good slave, even though one of these is perhaps difficult and the other generally speaking inferior” [25], which explains why some readers regards Aristotle’s Poetics “an apologist of both slavery and male supremacy” [26]. His dislike for Medea is a result of her control of the plot, which goes against his patriarchal convention that women are supposed to be weak and submissive as he views any portrayal of women as strong and cleaver “a theatrical device” [25]. His description of the role of women in his Poetics left many scholars believe that “Aristotle leaves no doubt concerning the subordinate role of women” [27]. The male gaze becomes extremely pronounced when he disassociates courage and intelligence form being linked to women which denounces any form of independence in female characters when it comes to plots and marginalizes strong female characters, such as Medea, from being as equally important as other male characters, such as Oedipus for example. Such criticism ultimately, as pointed out by Angela Curran, “falls short of encouraging independent, critical reflection in the viewer” [24]. What strengthen the claim that Aristotle’s criticism is conditioned by the rhetoric of the male gaze is when he calls poets to ennoble male characters even if they have defects [25]. Perfecting the presence of fictional male characters for them to be glorified while marginalizing female characters, who magnify their defects, is the embodiment of a male gaze at action. This poises the question of the way we are using the criticism of antiquity without questioning the embedded foundation that drives such criticism that is male-oriented. It does not mean that we need to denounce his criticism all together or stop reading or teaching his Poetics, but we need to acknowledge the ramification of his criticism on the way strong female characters, such as Medea, are being treated and portrayed and interpreted to date. Acknowledging the presence of the male gaze in critical texts will make our perception of past texts more sympathetic to marginalized characters. Sadly, Medea’s image has been dehumanized since she, as a mythological figure, has been treated as an object “of aesthetic contemplation” [19].

It is true that Medea’s visual representation in Delacroix’s and Klagmann’s paintings is not sexualized with her masculine features, but the exposure of her breasts brings in the question of the link between nudity and male gaze; should we regard it as a reference to her being a barbaric character (i.e. not Greek) or should we look further into it as a process of oppressing the female body to become an object of the male gaze? More specifically, what made the exposure of the breasts of a strong female figure be a statement? Is it a reference to the male painters’ own interpretations of her strength as a masculine characteristic which led to her body being treated like that of a man? The exposure of the chest brings in the aesthetical difference between being presented in nude and being naked. These two words form the framework upon which the male gaze controls the academic jargon that projects the usage of the female body by male painters. Kenneth Clark in The Nude begins the book with a focus on the emergence of the nude as a genre within Art History. He suggests that the word ‘nude’ presents a ‘defenseless body’ and states that it was introduced in the 18th century “to persuade the artless islanders that in countries where painting and sculpture were practiced and valued as they should be, the naked human body was the central subject of art” [28]. Greek mythology became a core source that inspired artists to depict nudes bodies, specifically, female bodies that would romanticize the angelic nature of womanhood.

Aristotle states that “art completes what nature cannot bring to finish. The artist gives us knowledge of natures unrealized ends” [28]. Such statement gives an authority to the creator of any artistic expression to finalize the presentation of objects including female bodies. The way male artists, particularly, chose to project strong female figures with nudity poses an important question on the process of objectifying female bodies has been normalized for centuries under the name of ‘artistic expression’. The statement, also, supports the claim that Aristotle was an early supporter of the male gaze that would chain the presence of female figures for centuries to come, especially, with his stress on women having to be ‘good’ in any literary work. Seeing the ramification of Aristotle’s comments on the presence of female figures within literary works and on the visual representation of mythological figures makes one wonder if male painters have the same view or if they were influenced by it.

A letter written by Delacroix in 1823 highlights the process by which a male painter like himself projects the female body as a tool for pleasure (not inspiration), he tells his friend Felix Guillemander, “You are moral and your pleasures are mingled with bitterness. In any case, they cannot all be so insipid, since that charming half of the human race which, we all know, gives so much pleasure to the other half, provides an occasional change from politics and card playing... in respect of that enchanting, seductive, and delightful sex... there are beauties to be found in provincial society” [29].

The female body has been rendered as a charming half of the human race, which gives so much pleasure to the other half (males). To him, the female body serves the other half sexually. This raises many questions about the male gaze, the role of nudity in paintings by male painters, and the way females project their own bodies in an image that is administered by a male gaze. I may be stretching Delacroix’s words here, but the male gaze seems to embody such expression for a reader like me (a female). Medea declared in the play that she will no longer allow Jason to control her body and would make him suffer for all the success and
pleasure she provided him. Such declaration from a female figure was not common at the time of Euripides and it might explain why visual masculine features are present in the two paintings. She took away the pleasure she gives to Jason; she took away her femininity.

The analysis of these two paintings aims to represent a comment on the nature of the male gaze that controlled these two different painters to project Medea in a similar manner (exposed breasts, holding a dagger with two boys around her). It should be noted that these two paintings reflect two common settings chosen by painters to position Medea within them: (1) either making her be surrounded by natural elements (such as Valentine Cameron Prinsep’s Medea the Sorceress, Anselm Feuerbach’s Medee et ses enfants, Corrado Giaquinto Medea) or (2) situated inside a palace (such as Victor Mottez’s Medée, Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione Medea, Charles-André van Loo Jason and Medea, Aimé Nicolas Morot Medea). Side by side, Delacroix’s and Klagmann’s Medeas form a catalyst that would deconstruct the male gaze, which controlled the representation of this female character across centuries. The background and the foreground will paint the narrative that is presented in these two paintings. Even though from the first glance they seem to be identical, the setting and the state of Medea present two different narratives. Delacroix’s Medea is afraid and impulsive, while the dagger is on full display whereas Klagmann’s Medea is contemplating and calculating every move while having the dagger concealed and part of it is outside the frame. The two paintings depict the moment Medea is about to slaughter her own children. These two conflicting emotions seem to represent the two perspectives adopted by male painters while reflecting such character on their canvas. Interestingly enough, they echo two principles laid out by Aristotle: pity and fear. The fact that male painters where unable to make such character evoke such conflicting emotions in one cohesive setting may explain further why Aristotle chose to exclude her from being a tragic hero. It seems that they did not accept the existence of a female murderer and their male gaze made it harder to depict the complexity of a strong female figure that would both ignite pity and fear. The intention of her wanting to kill her children is emphasized by the presence of the dagger in both paintings. However, Delacroix’s painting shows the fleeting Medea who is holding her own children, reflecting fear. Klagmann’s painting shows a seated Medea who is not moving while her children are playing in front of her, reflecting pity. Delacroix chose to make the scene more fearful by creating a movement with her carrying the children into a cave; we might say she was trying to hide them rather than killing them by presenting an alternative ending to insinuate that she was running away from a mob of angry Corinthians. Klagmann’s setting (her being seated inside a palace) is more close to Euripides’s story. The two settings reflect how even though the argument regarding the true version of Medea’s story, she will always be the one who killed her own children. Did the male gaze choose to omit the existence of many versions of this story or was this end chosen to deliver a more enticing creation that would serve the imagination of male artists?

Moreover, there is a link between Lord Byron and Delacroix which might explain his choice of depicting Medea in such manner (having the chest exposed). The French painter declares in one of his letters that he finds the writings of Lord Byron a catalyst for his creative process, he writes, “Mysterious type of work which peculiarly captivates the imagination” [30]. So it would not be a surprise to know that Byron is actually fascinated by Medea to the degree that he both translated parts of Medea’s story and stated in a letter he would like to ‘date’ a woman like Medea, as he writes, “I should have preferred Medea to any woman that ever breathed” [31]. The character of Medea was “constantly on Byron’s mind” as Lord Byron attests in a letter to Henry Drury explaining the reason behind him climbing the Cyanean Symplegades, he writes, “Had not this sublime passage been in my head, I should never have dreamed of ascending the rocks” [31]. Moreover, his early book Hours of Idleness has a translation from Euripides Medea. It would not be a stretch to say that his fascination with Medea exceeded the fictional world as he mentioned in a letter (dated 19 September, 1818) that he preferred to have Medea to the woman he was dating at the time, Margarita Cogni, he writes, “I should have preferred Medea to any woman that ever breathed” [31]. This begs the question if Delacroix’s interest in Medea is genuine or a means for him to ignite something from his imagination, that is, a “mediocre version of a subject that is suitable for me [Delacroix]” [30]. As an ode to Lord Byron, he might have chosen to depict her in an environment that is similar to Medea’s homeland as it was Lord Byron’s dream to visit Georgia [31]. His desire in creating a tragedy that would have captivated Lord Byron was adamant in Delacroix’s letters, but the law of the unities prevented such plan [30]. His stress on the importance of the unities demonstrates the impact of Aristotle’s Poetics on his own perception of Medea and supports the claim of the dominance of the male gaze within the Aristotelian aesthetics. He did not, however, perfect the visual representation of Medea as Aristotle was calling for but exposed her bare chest and chose to depict her murder scene, which calls in question the selective nature of the male gaze. His interest in violence might be due to his believe in the savage nature of mankind [25]. However, in this particular case, he clearly is focusing on the barbaric nature of Medea being non-Greek. By doing so, he is dehumanizing Medea by emphasizing her exotic nature, as he is clearly presenting her as an orient in this painting as it has a reminiscence of a painting he finished in 1857, Odalisque. The utilization of the erotic power calls in Audre Lorde’s explanation of the term, erotic, as “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual place, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” [23]. It has been “misnamed by men and used against women” which explains one possible reason behind the portrayal of her with an exposed chest [23]. The creative mistreatment of Medea under the name of ‘erotic power’ is demonstrated in one of
Delacroix’s letters where he justified the use of ‘savagery and barbarism’, which can be synonyms for erotic power, to destroy the archetypal form of beauty, he writes,

“But man himself, when he gives way to the savage instinct which is the very basis of his nature, does he not conspire with the elements to destroy the works of beauty? Does not barbarism, like the Fury who watches Sisyphus rolling his stone to the top of the mountain, return almost periodically to overthrow and confound, to being forth night after a too brilliant day?” [30].

The framework laid out by Lorde explains why the ‘erotic’ nature of things has been associated with female bodies as a means to control the narrative revolving their existence within Western aesthetics as the erotic “intellectualizes sensuality as a source of feminine power” [32]. If we are looking at old depictions of Medea, she did not wear clothes that would expose her chest, such as the fresco at House of Castor in Pompeii Medea before the murder of the children [33]. In the fresco, her chest is covered, and her children are visible playing in the background (alive) while she is standing with a dagger in her hands. The image of her with the dagger turned into a symbol that embodies her own identity within the Greek mythology and a symbol of the ruthlessness of the revenge of any scorned woman. The existence of the old man, who is watching over the kids, imposes a question regarding the juxtaposition between the presence of two figures that represent different set of emotions directed toward the children. The man in the background might be the tutor as indicated in Euripides text [14]. Compared to the two paintings, Delacroix’s and Klagmann’s Medeas are more masculine and seem to fetishize Medea as a ‘non-Greek’ individual. The mural does demonstrate how early visual depictions of Medea are not based on sexualizing female bodies to create a new narrative of the story by positioning Medea next to her children in a way that parallels the actual play. The two male painters chose to omit emotions from Medea that would humanize her, such as the scene where she asks her children to hug her ‘tight’ or when she expresses her sadness for not being able to see her children grow in front of her, and placed her as either a woman who is seeking power (depicting her setting on a thrown like chair) or an irrational woman (by depicting her running into a cave) [14]. The visual portrayal of Medea and the setting the two male painters chose for this mythological character illustrates the danger of the male gaze in flattening the complexity of female figures by simplifying women’s emotions into either anger or frenzy. Regardless of the way Medea has been depicted visually, the text ignites many interpretations of the way she, as a woman, rebelled against a patriarchal system when she experienced betrayal from the man she sacrificed everything for. The play itself appears to have been created to appeal to the masculine sensibilities by embodying the fears male audiences have toward women with power. It gave many men a reason to suppress and marginalize women since Medea’s representation within the Western literary canon is rendered through the male gaze.

4. Conclusion

As a female reader, I have to wonder about my own position in a world created by men. This was one of the reasons why Medea caught my attention, because she stood out to me even though the ruthless Medea, who killed her kids, is popularized by a text written by a man. Thinking about her story always makes me wonder how come a character like Medea is being rendered either as a heroine or a villain, whereas male figures of antiquities are crowned with the label of a tragic hero by Aristotle (such as Oedipus). Contemporary critics of Medea are still placing her within an ambivalent position within literary criticism, such as B. M. W. Knox in “The Medea of Euripides” and Denya L. Page in Medea [34, 35]. With the emergence of Postcolonialism it appears that Medea became a symbol for marginalized characters rather than villainous characters. Modern readers can find reminiscences of Medea in some literary works written by females such as Toni Morrison’s Beloved, which was treated as a strong comment on the monstrous effects of racism. Susan E. Babbitt makes a convincing case regarding such reading in her “Identity, knowledge, and Toni Morrison’s Beloved: Questions about Understanding Racism” where Medea was mentioned to parallel racism with mesogenic traits of patriarchal society [36]. With the centralization of female writers within the Western literary canon, sexualizing Medea becomes difficult since she is the embodiment of a strong female figure that is able to break the control of males around her. It might explain the way she has been projected by most male painters who were unable to romanticize her strength and turned her into an exotic femme fatale since their male gaze overrides it.

References


