

Medea and Mid-Victorian Marriage Legislation

Problematic Medea

Euripides' *Medea* has penetrated to parts of modernity most mythical figures have not reached. Since she first rolled off the printing presses half a millennium ago, she has inspired hundreds of performances, plays, paintings and operas.¹ *Medea* has murdered her way into a privileged place in the history of the imagination of the West, and can today command huge audiences in the commercial theatre. Yet in Britain, at least, her popularity on the stage is a relatively recent phenomenon. *Medea* has transcended history partly because she enacts a primal terror universal to human beings: that the mother-figure should *intentionally* destroy her own children. Yet this dimension of the ancient tragedy was until the twentieth century found so disturbing as largely to prevent unadapted performances. On the British stage it was not until 1907 that Euripides' *Medea* was performed, without alteration, in English translation (see Ch. 17).

Although *Medea*'s connection with the British stage goes back to at least the 1560s, when Seneca's *Medea* was performed at Cambridge University,² she only exerted a subterranean influence on Renaissance, Jacobean, and Restoration tragedy.³ It is instructive to contemplate the reaction to Simon Mayr's opera *Medea in Corinto*, which caused a stir at the King's Theatre in London in 1826–8 as a result of the performance of Giuditta Pasta in the title role.⁴ British audiences were able to tolerate 'unnatural' deeds of violence more happily in the opera house (especially if the performances were in Italian) than in the English-speaking theatre. But even in Meyer's opera, *Medea*'s culpability is diminished by having her conceive her barbarous plans under pressure from Egeo (Aegeus).⁵ Henry Crabb Robinson saw Pasta in 1828, and recorded that the effect of the murder scene was 'overpowering'. He

wondered what a great tragedienne might have made of the role, while observing that of all ‘Grecian fables’ this particular one ‘has never flourished on the English stage’.⁶

Robinson had a point. Euripides’ *Medea* had presented an almost impossible challenge to eighteenth-century sentiment, which abhorred mothers who intentionally killed their children (see Ch. 3). The only successful British *Medea* in that century was Richard Glover’s, performed at Drury Lane in 1767, in which *Medea* was redesigned as a near-perfect mother sent temporarily insane. But another reason why Glover’s play was a success was that Act III offered the audience a spectacular sorcery scene of the type which they enjoyed in ballets. The most famous *Medea*-entertainment was Jean-Georges Noverre’s stunning ballet *Médée*, first performed at the Württemberg court in 1762, and subsequently enjoying tours to Vienna, Warsaw, Paris, Italy, St Petersburg, and England. Noverre drew on Euripides and Seneca, but his *Medea* (unlike Glover’s) was a truly superhuman witch, with awesome magical powers. This ballet was popular at the King’s Theatre in London, where Continental entertainments featuring the ‘supernatural’ configuration of *Medea* continued to be performed until the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁷

Yet *Medea* was nearly invisible in the British theatre for several decades. It was only after 1845, and especially 1856, that a stream of dramas on the theme began to flow and did not dry up until the late 1870s. If the virginal Theban *Antigone* was the Greek tragic figure who dominated the 1840s and early 1850s (see Ch. 12), by 1857 she had relinquished ground to the abandoned mother from Colchis. The heroine who represented the sanctity of familial ties was displaced by the one who represented their desecration. An exemplary female who excited admiration gave place to one who inspired at best pity and at worst revulsion. *Medea* was everywhere—in serious spoken tragedy, witty sung burlesque, and proletarian spectacular. She appeared in venues ranging from the elegant Olympic to the downmarket Grecian Saloon. For the first time in this book a single Greek tragedy produced, within the

space of a few years, a greater number of separate performed adaptations in English than any other Greek tragedy inspired during the entire period 1660–1914.

In this chapter we shall discuss no fewer than nine different Medea dramas performed in Britain between 1845 and the 1870s, introducing numerous women performers who impersonated Medea (several of them foreigners, like Euripides' Black Sea heroine), along with a handful of men. But above all we shall seek to explain the causes—and some effects—of this mid-Victorian theatrical epidemic. Sudden interest in a myth previously regarded as troublesome demands explanation, and it will be found in thinking about changes in the social perception of the actress, in conventions of theatrical transvestism, and in the early appearance of 'feminist' ideas about women's need for independence, prefiguring by decades those more commonly associated with the New Woman of Ibsen's dramas. The Victorian burlesque Medea did things few heroines in other imaginary contexts could yet dare or achieve—she extracted herself, triumphantly, from a ruined marriage, while succeeding in keeping her sons alive, or cunningly coerced her husband into mending his ways, or took the initiative to correspond with her love rival over financial arrangements, or argued with cogency, wit, and panache that women's lot was iniquitous. Tragic dramatists, on the other hand, used more sombre means to show how all the economic and legal cards were stacked against women like Medea, who therefore deserved pity rather than condemnation. The story of the Victorian Medea is sufficiently complicated to require relating in chronological sequence, partly because the plays tend to comment on their predecessors in a self-conscious intertextual manner. But the shape of the narrative is above all determined by the most important reason for the centrality of Medea at this time: the passing of an epochal series of new laws regulating matrimony.

The Impossibility of Divorce

It now seems astonishing that divorce was not a live issue in mainstream English culture until the middle of the nineteenth century, when the law of divorce still followed the canon law derived from Rome. All other Protestant countries in Europe, including Scotland, and in the American colonies, had long made legal provision for divorce. Yet it was not possible in England except by the a private Act of Parliament, an extremely unusual measure available only to the very rich and almost exclusively to men.⁸ Its rarity is illustrated by the Archbishop of Canterbury's lament in 1809 that the divorce rate had risen to a scandalous three a year!⁹ Along with the absence of a divorce law, the eighteenth century gave fathers absolute rights to custody of children of a marriage, regardless of which spouse was at fault and regardless of the age of the children. Fathers could also ban all contact between children and their mothers. This situation explains why Euripides' Medea, who is determined that her husband is to have no power over their children, had to be so radically altered before the nineteenth century. It would have made much more unpalatable viewing in such an ideological environment than in fifth-century Athens, where divorce was practised, even if, as Medea complained, it was not 'respectable' for women (236–7).

By the 1830s, however, humanitarians were at last questioning the absolute right of fathers to bar mothers from all access to their children, and the case of the celebrated Caroline Norton swung public opinion in mothers' favour. Norton, as the beautiful granddaughter of the dramatist Richard Brinsley Sheridan, came from a family that has been encountered several times in the course of this book. She had her children forcibly removed by her jealous husband, who in 1836 accused no lesser man than the Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, of adultery with his wife. Although the jury dismissed the case, Mr Norton cruelly exercised his right to bar his wife from all access to her children until they reached the age of majority.¹⁰ In 1837 the radical MP for Reading, Thomas Talfourd (see Ch. 11), introduced the Infant Custody Act. It was passed in 1839, at last making it possible for

women to receive custody of children under seven, and visitation rights thereafter. The Act is now seen as a watershed; for the first time it ‘stripped traditional unlimited patriarchal authority from the father’, and heralded all the reforming acts concerned with divorce and women’s property which were to follow.¹¹ It also precipitated a debate on marriage and women’s rights which was to increase in importance over the next decades.

Talfourd’s patron Lord Brougham tried to reform divorce procedure in 1844.¹² But there were fears that it would lead to the impoverishment of abandoned wives and children. The debate in parliament certainly informed various passages in the first of the nineteenth-century Medea plays, Planché’s *The Golden Fleece; or, Jason in Colchis and Medea in Corinth*. This important drama, based on Grillparzer as well as Euripides and first performed in 1845 following the Mendelssohn *Antigone* (see Ch. 12), inaugurated a tradition of entertainments based on the Medea myth which lasted throughout the period of matrimonial legislation, culminating in *Jason and Medea: A Ramble after a Colchian* in 1878. Influenced by Planché’s play, this burlesque was performed at the Garrison Theatre in Woolwich toward the end of the fashion for Classical burlesque.¹³ Planché’s *The Golden Fleece* was itself regularly revived after its first production in 1845, not least because of the increasing topicality of Medea’s predicament.

The Enterprising Medea of the English Golden Fleece

When the New Woman emerged in the drama at the end of the nineteenth century, one of the arenas in which she had been prefigured in reality was, ironically enough, the acting profession. The idea (not of course historically confined to Victorian Britain) that the star actress enjoyed unusual freedom was widely expressed in women’s fiction, journals, and memoirs,¹⁴ and the actress seems to have enjoyed a similarly privileged and/or exceptional status. One such example was the acting career of Helen Taylor (stepdaughter of John Stuart

Mill and daughter of Helen Taylor Mill), which she pursued from the 1850s onwards in order to secure her independence. Helen Faucit, the famous Dublin and Edinburgh Antigone, even managed to combine fame with domestic stability. One of the most striking features of Planché's *The Golden Fleece* is the interplay between the dominant, powerful figure of Medea the heroine, and the social identity of the prominent actress-manager, Eliza Vestris, who played her.

Vestris had become the first woman to manage a London theatre when she took over management of the Olympic Theatre in 1831. Together with Planché, Vestris had staged the first of the classical burlesques that were to prove so popular during the course of the century (see Chs. 12 and 13); and her dark features and exotic (Regency) past as a diva in Italian opera made her a suitable choice for Medea, whom she played 'according to the approved style of dishevelled tresses and severe costume'.¹⁵ But it was not only her previous professional appearances as prima donna that marked her out as a free woman; she could also be said to embody the independence of mind and body that the role of Medea entailed in her professional life beyond the stage. In her first curtain speech at the Olympic she proudly proclaimed:

Noble and gentle—matrons—patrons—friends!

Before you here a ventr'ous woman bends!

A warrior woman—that in strife embarks

The first of all dramatic Joan of Arcs.

Cheer on the enterprise thus dared by me!

The first that ever led a company.¹⁶

Madame Vestris (as she was somewhat reverentially and exotically known) took the part of Medea in Planché's *The Golden Fleece*, but as a regular actress in burlesque, her most common role was the breeches part. In Planché's extravaganza she played opposite Priscilla Horton as Jason, who (as we have seen) was like Madame Vestris renowned above all for her shapely legs.¹⁷ The reluctance on the part of Victorian journalists to mention male impersonation in interviews with the actresses has led commentators to wonder whether this signals its relative unimportance or its perilous nature.¹⁸ It may well be that '[t]ranssexual casting was one way to give women the sort of mythic adventures [others imagined]'.¹⁹ For like the New Woman of the 1890s, when Priscilla Horton performed in Planché's burlesque of *Medea*, she wore unfeminine garb: not male attire, but a costume that was symbolically different from the voluminous Victorian petticoats. Therefore the burlesque actress was not only a woman of independent means through her pursuit of a career: by being clad in a costume that foreshadowed the famous knickerbockers of the *fin de siècle*, she enjoyed a freedom of movement that the normally restricted female body could never hope to share.

The recent Theatre Regulation Act of 1843 had concerned itself, amongst other things, with the dangers inherent in the ambiguity of cross-dressed roles. It has been suggested that it may be possible to see a subversive consciousness at play beyond the evident sex-appeal of the male impersonations.²⁰ If we look at *The Golden Fleece*—and indeed the other burlesques of *Medea* where men too (to borrow Froma Zeitlin's phrase) 'play the Other'²¹—it is clear that there is, at least on some occasions, a serious manipulation of Victorian gender boundaries in the cross-dressed roles, which raises questions that come to dominate the stage at the turn of the century (see Ch. 17).

If Medea the outsider transgressed boundaries, so too did Madame Vestris; but unlike her Greek persona, Eliza Vestris crossed boundaries with pioneering spirit and apparently without blame.²² For the success of *The Golden Fleece* was partly due to the piquancy of its

casting of a publicly celebrated couple, soon to be married (the second time for Madame Vestris)—the exotic foreigner and Charles Mathews, an English public-schoolboy—as Medea and The Chorus respectively.²³

In a rewrite of the plot, Medea turns out to have deceived both chorus and audience by merely pretending to have ‘flogged’ her boys. Planché, as he explains in his Argument to the play, has chosen to ‘redeem the character of the unfortunate heroine’ and follow the historian Aelian in maintaining that the Euripidean account of Medea’s infanticide was written following a bribe from the Corinthians, who were themselves the guilty party.²⁴ Like Grillparzer, Planché chooses to inform his audience of the pre-history of Medea in order to present her case in the most sympathetic light. In Part I not only do we see Jason’s utter dependency on Medea for his early successes, we also learn that it was Jason, not Medea, who killed Apsyrtus when he ‘Let fly a blow that would have felled an ox— | Black’d both his precious eyes, before so blue, | And from his nose the vital claret drew’.²⁵

Planché, with his male chorus of one, has of necessity done away with the ‘Women of Corinth’ speech, replacing the general complaint of the Euripidean Medea with an account of personal grievance sung to the tune of ‘The Fine Young English Gentleman’. This Medea has to put up with her absentee husband, who abandons her and the children to a dubious fate in cramped lodgings, whilst he is happily ensconced in the palace, lavishly entertaining his royal mistress. But this poor Medea (because of the absence of divorce legislation) cannot be shot of her thankless burden:

He leaves me to darn his stockings, and mope in the house all day,
Whilst he treats *her* to see ‘Antigone’, with a box at the Grecian play,
Then goes off to sup with Corinthian Tom, or whoever, he meets by the way,
And staggers home in a state of beer, like (I’m quite ashamed to say)

A fine young Grecian gentleman,
One of the classic time.²⁶

Moreover, Planché's male Chorus, far from being sympathetic to Medea's plight, delivers a deeply misogynistic view of the perils of Cupid on a young man's heart in the place of the Euripidean ode in praise of moderation.²⁷ However, Planché's handling of the events of the plot would seem to fly in the face of the Chorus's assessment. Not only does his Medea draw the line at internecine killing, but she has little difficulty in winning over her audience to her side with an adversary in Jason, who is a drunken, cowardly, and serial philanderer. And when she turns to the audience in the last moments of the play to appeal to the Grand Jury—a punning plea, both to continue the theatrical run and to reach a judicial settlement in favour of the wronged woman—there is little doubt that the audience's sympathies are expected to lie with her.²⁸

At the end of *The Golden Fleece* Medea triumphs in the sense that she takes the children, alive and well, off to Athens in her chariot. But on the other hand she is the abandoned, ill-used wife, watching her husband alienated from herself and his children by his passion for Glauce. The drama thus explores, in a comic vein, the plight of wives should divorce become accessible to husbands who had tired of them. When Jason is annoyed with Medea's nagging, she says that he threatens her with 'getting a Scotch divorce'.²⁹ For while Jason would have found it virtually impossible to divorce Medea in England, divorce was already cheaply available in Scotland on the grounds of both adultery and desertion.³⁰ Marital breakdown is thus explicitly figured in *The Golden Fleece* as a contentious issue, even while its powerful leading actress was known to be about to enter matrimony with its leading actor. By 1850 the more general issue of women's status—'the woman question', as it was called—

began to dominate public debate;³¹ it was decided to set up a Royal Commission to investigate the problem of the non-existent divorce law.

Medea at the Grecian Saloon

The inauguration of the Royal Commission on Divorce in 1850 is reflected in the spectacular entertainment by Jack Wooler, *Jason and Medea: A Comic. Heroic. Tragic. Operatic.*

Burlesque-Spectacular Extravaganza, performed at the proletarian Grecian Saloon in 1851.³²

Like the plays by Grillparzer and Planché, Jack Wooler's *Jason and Medea* begins with the events narrated in the third book of Apollonius Rhodius' epic *Argonautica*. Whereas Planché comically alludes to the stage conventions of Greek tragedy when he avoids enacting the capture of the fleece ('You'll think, perhaps, you should have seen him do it | But 't isn't classical—you'll hear, not view it'),³³ Wooler chooses to entertain his audience with the very spectacles that Planché so tantalizingly denies. Act I alone shifts from the clouds above Olympus, to a rocky and desolate island (where the Argonauts have landed), to the city of Æetes (with the Euxine Sea behind), all with the help of Mercury's wand. It then moves on to Hecate's temple at Medea's behest ('Melt tower and town! Rise, Hecate's shrine! behold!'),³⁴ before passing through the Field of Mars, the dragon's lair and ending up at the port from which the Argo escapes.

However, as with Planché's treatment of the myth, the most notable effect of including the background to the events in Corinth is to enhance Medea's case. At the end of Act I when Jason has overcome the dragon with Medea's aid, he proclaims, parodying a Byronic rhyme:³⁵

The fleece is mine—and it shall ever be a
Pledge of my passion for my own Medea.

But as soon as they arrive in Colchis, the philanderer takes the decision to break his pledge, to the popular tune of ‘Jeanette and Jeanot’:

Come conscience—I have loved you full a year

One can’t be constant constantly my dear.³⁶

Yet Wooler’s Medea has shown herself to be a match for male tyranny from the first act, when she sings a song in defiance of her father’s threats of restraint:

If all girls had my spirit—they wouldn’t thus be done—

I’d rather wed our butcher boy than ever be a nun.³⁷

Jason in Corinth seems to have forgotten Medea’s powers of sorcery, which enabled her to stage manage events for him in Act I, and which assist her now in melting towers and towns, and conjuring devils in a darkened wood. Like Grillparzer’s Medea, Wooler’s heroine is pushed to the limits by the savage cruelties of a Jason, who deliberately flaunts his latest conquest. Even Creusa pities Medea’s public humiliation, although her pity comes too late to avoid the wrath of Medea who contrives for her a combusted, onstage end. This Medea merely kills her rival, not her own (here absent) children. Triumphant Medea magics herself away into the ether with the help of a white sheet, leaving a cursing Jason to fall and fatally crack his head. In the final moments of Wooler’s play she re-emerges at the back of the stage in a chariot, agreeing to revive Jason with the Golden Fleece if he will only take her back as wife. The revived Jason ends the play with these utterly implausible lines:

My own dear Medea, all your grief is past

You were my first love and shall be my last.³⁸

Marriage here at all costs is to be favoured over desertion, because in 1851 an abandoned Medea still had no future whatsoever. Like Planché, Wooler here offers to some extent a patriarchal study of a woman *in extremis*, in which the masculinity of her adversary is however somewhat muted and compromised by the fact that Jason is a breeches role. In the final analysis, Wooler's extravaganza evades the plight of the separated wife, attempting to negate the real social implications of the ancient myth, by reuniting Jason and Medea at its conclusion.

Legouvé's Medea (1856)

When the bill which was finally to introduce divorce arrived in parliament in 1856, feminists and their male supporters agitated feverishly. First, they drew attention to the sexual double standard implied by the bill's differential treatment of possible grounds for divorce for men and for women, and secondly, they pointed out the terrible hardship caused by married women's inability to hold property in their own name. On marriage a man assumed all legal rights over his wife's property. Worse, he owned any property she assumed thereafter, including earnings, rents, and income. This led to the iniquitous situation in which even abandoned wives were forced to hand over their money for the remainder of their lives. They were also debarred from remarriage since divorce was impossible. The debate continued throughout 1856 and both sessions of 1857, becoming more impassioned as the months wore on. The bill came, correctly, to be perceived as a measure which would alter the legal status of women in an unprecedented manner.³⁹ And during the years 1856–7, Medea, the

abandoned wife and mother of Greek myth, became one of the most ubiquitous heroines on the London stage.

If Grillparzer's *Medea* lurked behind the burlesques of Planché and Wooler, in 1856–7 it was partly a Franco-Italian conception of the heroine that fuelled the topical enthusiasm for her plight. In June 1856 the *diva* Adelaide Ristori brought an Italian translation of Ernest Legouvé's new tragedy *Medea* to the Lyceum (Fig. 14.1). Legouvé's play spoke directly to the hearts of the London public, now so exercised by the reporting of the parliamentary debate on divorce, precisely because, as one reviewer noted, Legouvé had made the ancient heroine much more accessible, tender, and pitiable. He had eschewed 'the grandeur of the Euripidean heroine' and had 'contented himself with the domestic interest of her misfortunes. The deserted wife, the distressed mother, alone remained'.⁴⁰

Legouvé's three-act French adaptation draws on Euripides, although diluting *Medea*'s responsibility for the deaths of her sons. She kills them, but her motive is changed to an altruistic desire to prevent the Corinthians from subjecting them to a crueller death when they discover that she has murdered Jason's new wife. Legouvé aimed to do for *Medea* what Racine had done for Euripides' *Iphigenia* and *Phaedra*; he defined his work as 'collaboration' by a 'temporary partner' with the original Greek man of genius.⁴¹ The tragedy was written for Madame Rachel, the famous French actress whose performance in Racine's *Phèdre* was held in international awe. But Rachel rejected the role of *Medea* on the ground that this heroine was 'unnatural', despite Legouvé's amelioration of her crime.⁴²

Indeed, the role of *Medea* repelled many actresses, who feared that her reputation might become confused with their own. Legouvé, frustrated, offered the part to Adelaide Ristori, Rachel's Italian rival, who had also avoided acting *Medea*. She explained to her public the reason why she had rejected the *Medea* of 1814 by the *duca della Valle*:

Nature having gifted me with a high sense of maternal love . . . I could not present such a monstrosity on the stage, and in spite of the pressing requests of my managers to interpret that role I was unable to overcome my aversion to it.⁴³

But she agreed to do the Legouv  version, because he had ‘had discovered a way to make the killing of the children appear both just and necessary’.⁴⁴ Indeed, throughout the last part of Legouv ’s play, there is never any doubt that Medea’s love for her children exceeds her hatred for Jason. Ristori took her impersonation of Medea all over the globe, along with her other virtuoso roles—Marie Antoinette and either queen in Schiller’s *Maria Stuart*. But Medea was the heroine she invariably performed on tour, in Spain, Portugal, North America, Argentina and Brazil in addition to the most famous production in London in the summer of 1856.⁴⁵

Ristori was tall and statuesque, with chestnut hair, and acted Medea in an imitation chiton and long blue cloak (Fig. 14.2). She was proud of the ‘attitudes’ she struck, for which she had studied the Niobe groups in the Uffizi Museum in Florence.⁴⁶ Her Medea was admired by all who enjoyed neoclassical theatre, including George Henry Lewes (George Eliot’s partner), who later wrote that the actress ‘completely conquered’ him in the role: ‘The exquisite grace of her attitudes, the mournful beauty of her voice, the flash of her wrath and the air of supreme distinction which seems native to her, gave a charm to this performance which is unforgettable’.⁴⁷

Mark Lemon’s Libelled Lady

Medea had appeared in French burlesques since at least the early eighteenth century; Cherubini’s opera *M d e* (1797) alone had inspired three parodies.⁴⁸ It is this tradition that lies behind the appearance, shortly after Legouv ’s tragedy had opened to great acclaim at the

Théâtre Italien in Paris on 8 April 1856, of the burlesque of Cogniard, Grange, and Bourdois entitled *La Médée en Nanterre* (Théâtre des Variétés, 9 June). It is the multilingual layers of the performance—that a French version of a Greek tragedy is now being performed in an Italian translation in Paris—that provide the source of much amusement. Similarly, the fact that the London audience was being treated to an Italian translation of a French version of a Greek tragedy did not escape the wit of English writers. Two burlesques reacting to Ristori's play opened simultaneously on 14 July. The one at the Adelphi was by Mark Lemon, the editor of *Punch*, and was entitled *Medea; or, a Libel on the Lady of Colchis*. In its prologue Creon explains:

If your Italian scholarship's complete
And you can pay a guinea for your seat
Go, and applaud an artist truly grand
And don't be proud because you understand.
But if your stock of choice Italian's small
And the wife wants the guinea towards her shawl
You're better where you are—You'll get a notion
Of what has thrown the town into commotion.
While our Medea here is doubly strong
It's twice as moral, and not half as long.⁴⁹

That Lemon's Medea is 'twice as moral' is open to doubt, but it is true that his audience is being offered a remarkably close rendering of Legouv e's version, albeit in another key.

But there the similarities between the French burlesques and Lemon's seem to end. In *La M ed e en Nanterre* the characters are all attached to a circus troupe, with Cr eon as the

manager of the acrobats and Créuse as the high-wire dancer; Médée is a fortune-teller and Jason earns his living as a fairground wrestler.⁵⁰ Whilst Lemon's acrobatic and knifethrowing Jason bears more than a passing resemblance to his French counterpart, the two English burlesques generally enjoy a much closer relationship with their tragic sources. Lemon's protagonist is hardened by the experience of poverty and toil, and has little demonstrable feeling for the children. When Jason says that the children 'weigh immensely on my mind', Medea complains:

And so they ought, for it's three years old chap
Since for those kids you've paid a single rap—
It's difficult to say what brats were made for
Unless to teach us 'Children must be paid for.'⁵¹

After Jason has threatened Medea with deportation (he cannot afford the £2,000 necessary for a divorce) and claimed custody of the children, Medea begins to execute her revenge. When Glauce comes to warn Medea of her imminent deportation, the princess's altruistic motives are misconstrued by Medea, whose avenging hand fatally daubs her victim's cheeks with black (poisonous) face-paint. When the police arrive with a warrant for Medea's arrest, Jason announces his intention of sending the children to boarding school. Medea calls the boys over to bid them farewell, and in a startling and unprecedented *coup de théâtre*, she stabs them both onstage for all to see:

Stay stop a word or two
Children come hither I am sent away
And therefore I have only this to say

That if your father thinks he's served me out
He'll alter his opinion I've no doubt—
As witness this and this. [*Stabs children there and now*]⁵²

The 'moral', to which the Prologue refers, is the deeply ironic coda that is self-consciously appended to Lemon's play. Jason unconvincingly claims to Medea:

Yes, had you kept this business off your hands
And like Griselda bowed to my commands,
I had forgiven you for my past desertion
And spent my life with you without coercion.⁵³

Medea apologizes for any 'aggravation' she has caused, pays reparation by restoring both Glauce (with the aid of a damp towel) and her boys (by ordering them to 'look alive'). She is then miraculously united in embrace with Jason, proclaiming her own (significantly unreciprocated) undying love.

Whilst Lemon's play apparently raises questions merely to sidestep them in the final moments, what is new in his burlesque is an attempt to provide an exploration of, as well as an explanation for, the hardening of feelings in Medea. The burlesque explores the social reality which Medea would encounter if abandoned in Victorian London rather than archaic Corinth. Medea has been forced into training her children in pickpocketing because 'one's vile husband no allowance makes'.⁵⁴ Jason threatens to have her arrested, and demands she agree to a divorce, saying he will only support the children if she does so. Even the comic defence of Lemon's Medea by Orpheus in Act I has its serious edge:

A woman's face grows haggard who reflects
All day upon her husband's base neglects.
And it don't mend her temper to consider
That tho' a wife she's lonely as a widder.
As for the other charges you have filed
My classical Lothario—draw it mild.⁵⁵

Indeed, the plot of Lemon's burlesque hit too close to home. And although Wright was noted as one of the finest comedians of his generation, as a male performer impersonating Medea, he played all too naturalistically. One reviewer remarked that in Mr Wright's Medea the audience saw only 'the wronged wife, the wretched woman, demanding sympathy, and forbidding laughter'.⁵⁶ Divorce, after all, was not yet a possibility in England.

Robert Brough's Best of Mothers

The partisan subtitle of the other British burlesque of the Legouv e–Ristori tragedy that year, which opened at the Olympic, was *The Best of Mothers, with a Brute of a Husband*. Its author, Robert Brough, thus located it contentiously within the debate about the abuse of women by home-abandoning husbands. Even the programme announced its connection with legislative controversy: the setting of Scene I, 'A Palace near Corinth', is described as staging the 'Factitious Opposition to a Proposed Measure for Legalizing Marriage with a Non-Deceased Wife's Rival.'⁵⁷ Orpheus defends Medea: 'When wives are bad, the husbands are to blame', warning Jason that his intention is illegal and amounts to bigamy; but Jason is defiant, telling the minstrel that 'the marriage tie's no noose to me'.⁵⁸

Like Lemon, Brough places great emphasis on the penury to which Medea and the children have been reduced, as they too are forced to beg for their survival. Medea's begging

patter starts as a rewrite of the ‘Women of Corinth’ speech before taking on a life of its own, in which the pathos engendered almost eclipses the comic realization that Medea is offering a kind of confidence trick to the passers-by:

My Grecian friends, with deep humiliation
I stand in this disgraceful situation,
Though unaccustom’d publicly to speak,
I have not tasted food since Tuesday week.
Three sets of grinders out of work you see,
Through the invention of machinery.
A landlord, as inclement as the weather,
Has seiz’d our flock bed—we were out of feather.
Shoeless and footsore, I’ve through many lands
Walked, with this pair of kids upon my hands.
The tear of infancy requests you’ll stop it—
(*looking round*) Bother! there’s no one looking at us—drop it!⁵⁹

Jason subsequently explains to her that he will permit her to remarry anyone that she pleases, for ‘Our separation equals a divorce’. The burlesque enacts in ancient Corinth the type of scenario which many feared the divorce bill, if made law, would precipitate. Jason insists that Medea must send him the boys as soon as they are old enough to educate, a reference to the right fathers had to custody over the age of 7. In the event this burlesque saves the lives of both Creon’s new bride and Medea’s children, while leaving anxiously suspended the issue of Medea’s future. But Creusa promises that she will ensure that Medea gets permanent custody

of the children, and that she receives sufficient money. The women thus find a way around the problems inflicted on them by men.⁶⁰

If we seem to be discussing too earnestly the social significance of what was an inherently light-hearted comic genre, it is important to be aware that the Victorians themselves took it seriously. The Medea burlesques are often discussed alongside the Italian-language tragedy as if there were little generic difference between the performances. Indeed, what is striking about English tragedy and burlesque in general at this time is the extent to which the separate genres become intermeshed in the minds of audiences. George Henry Lewes's comments on Ristori's performance, partially quoted above, are illustrative in this regard. Lewes recalls of a revival of this production that when Ristori 'conquered' him in the role of Medea, 'the conquest was all the more noticeable, because it triumphed over the impressions previously received from Robson's burlesque imitation'.⁶¹ The inference, of course, is that Lewes did not see Ristori as Medea during her first London tour, whereas he had seen and been overwhelmed by the burlesque performance of Robert Brough. But since Robson's performance is here cited alongside that of a leading tragedienne of the European stage, Lewes's comments are also testimony to the power and seriousness of Robson's burlesque interpretation of the role. And the illustrations bear testimony to the uncanny resemblances between the two actors as they performed Medea (compare Fig. 14.3 with 14.2 above).

Elsewhere Lewes explains the success of a revival of Planché's *The Golden Fleece* with reference to the extraordinary self-discipline of the actors, who were able to engender both hilarity and credulity in the audience at one and the same time. Burlesque, in Lewes's formulation, is rooted in the real world; and he maintains that the finest of burlesque acting can 'show that acting burlesque is the gross personation of a character, not the outrageous defiance of all character; the personation has truth, although the character itself may be

preposterously drawn.⁶² The degree of seriousness attached to burlesque by the 1850s can also be gauged by the fact that Cambridge undergraduates, according to Burnand, found it difficult to distinguish between tragedy and burlesque. Burnand recalls of his fellow thespians in the Amateur Dramatic Club:

. . . at that time [Lent Term 1854] we probably mistook tragedy for burlesque, and burlesque for tragedy . . . we were constantly seeing Robson . . . when in his burlesque he touched the very boundary line of tragedy . . .⁶³

In Brough's play, the penury of the deserted wife is underlined in what is initially a hilarious begging scene. The younger of Jason and Medea's sons wears a placard round his neck with the word 'orphans' in four 'languages': first transliterated into the Greek alphabet (*faqerle*"), then translated into French (*Orphelins*), Italian (*Orfani*), and English respectively. And at one point, Medea is driven to distraction by the plurality of linguistic options available to her for revenge:

'Sangue! sangue! Straziar spezzar suo cuore.'

Which means, translated, something red and gory.

'Unche di spavento's atroce strano'

—Murder in Irish! No—Italiano!

'Ai! Ai! Dia mow Kephelas flox owrania,

'By-ee tiddy moi zeen èté Kurdos'

—Stop, that's Euripides! 'Du sang! du sang!'

'Briser torturer son cœur—oui!' That's wrong!

I've got confused with all these versions jinglish—

Thunder and turf!—And even that's not English.⁶⁴

A closely related source of the humour in Brough's burlesque was precise parody of the conventions of Ristori's Italian school of acting, for Robson found his own route to the 'melodramatic abandonment or lashing-up to a certain point of excitement' he shared with his model. Ristori went to see Robson, and commented, 'Uomo straordinario', as well she might.⁶⁵ For Robson indeed took the role of Medea more seriously than might have been expected in a burlesque star, and was admired by the most intellectual of playgoers, including Henry Morley, Professor of English at University College, London, whose account sits alongside his reviews of important productions of Shakespeare. Morley praises Robson's 'wonderful burlesque of Medea, wherein he seems to have reached the climax of success in personating jealousy by a wild mingling of the terrible with the grotesque.'⁶⁶ Burnand, writing some years after the early performances, recalls Robson's 'best days at the Olympic', when he took the parts of Shylock and Medea with equal conviction.⁶⁷ Robson's Medea was actually considered more truly tragic than Ristori's by some educated spectators, including Charles Dickens:

It is an odd but perfectly true testimony to the extraordinary power of his performance (which is of a very remarkable kind indeed) that it points the badness of Ristori's acting, in a most singular manner, by bringing out what she does and does not do. The scene with Jason is perfectly terrific; and in the manner in which the comic rage and jealousy does not pitch itself over the float at the stalls is in striking contrast to the manner in which the tragic rage and jealousy does. He has a frantic song and dagger dance, about two minutes long altogether, which has more passion in it than Ristori could express in fifty years.⁶⁸

In the Dublin performance ‘the passionate display of histrionic power . . . well-nigh appalled by its terrible earnestness and desperation.’ Robson’s *Medea* was ‘sublime in its savage intensity, and life-like and human in its commonplace features’. He portrayed ‘the tigerish affection with which she regards the children she is afterwards to slay . . . through the medium of doggerel and slang, with astonishing force and vigour’.⁶⁹

Robson won more sympathy for *Medea* than any previous actor on the British stage. Perhaps the audience found it easier to deal with *Medea*’s challenge to conventional notions of femininity when the actor impersonating her was a man. Yet Robson’s passion as *Medea* was touching and surprisingly ‘real’:

Mr Robson was the *Medea* of vulgar life; and, in the climax of the interest, he passed out of the burlesque altogether . . . with an earnestness that dissipated all mockery, and made every heart in the house thrill with painful sympathy.⁷⁰

Indeed there are constant shifts in tone and register that reflect the human and superhuman sides of *Medea* herself. She pursues vengeance with Marlovian gusto, but only after being driven to the limits of endurance by the supremely arrogant Jason, who pronounces his intention to strip her of her children as well as her marital status:

Medea (giving vent to her suppressed passion)

Now drop it! I can’t stand it any longer!

Oh, gods celestial and gods infernal!

Oh, powers of mischief—dark and sempiternal!

Demons above, and deities below,

I ask ye sternly—isn’t this a go?⁷¹

She tries to smother her feelings for her children at their farewell, and (as with Legouv e’s version) is reduced to a state of despair and hurt at the possibility that Creusa has poisoned their hearts against their mother. When she reads the note that they have brought from Creusa, which promises to restore the children and to give her money, the stage direction describes her ‘*wholly overcome by this sympathy, stands trembling—crushing the letter in her hand; then she falls sobbing on her knees, embracing her two children, who have knelt on each side*’. The author’s note to the acting edition of the text at this point instructs all the characters that ‘the action must be conducted [from now on until the end]. . . as in tragedy’.⁷²

In direct imitation of the French version, as Brough’s Medea hears the rabble approaching, she enfolds her children in her robes to protect them. When Creon threatens to seize the boys, it is already too late as ‘Medea is seen standing alone, on steps . . . quivering with emotion—reeking knife in her hand . . .’. Then the tragedy finally gives way to wish-fulfilment with the dagger turning into a jester’s bauble as Medea is on the verge of killing Jason, and with Creusa being brought back on stage miraculously revived. However, what is different about Medea’s final speech in comparison with the endings of Wooler’s and Lemon’s plays, is that Brough’s coda is not simply deeply ironic; it is a flagrant denial of any such attempts to rewrite the story of Medea. Brough’s heroine turns to the audience in the final moments of the play, flanked by her revived children, and exclaims:

What can a poor, lone, helpless woman do—

Battled on all sides—but appeal to you?

(*To audience*) My plot destroyed—my damages made good.

They’d change my very nature if they could.

Don’t let them—rather aid me to pursue

My murd'rous career the season through;
Repentance is a thought that I abhor,
What I have done don't make me sorry for.⁷³

Behind the traditional plea for the audience's support is an unequivocal call for endorsement of all that the New Woman was later to stand for: 'They'd change my very nature if they could. | Don't let them' cries Medea, there on the London stage, some-sixty two years before women over the age of thirty were finally granted the vote. Robert Brough, who had in the previous year published satirical, radical verse with his *Songs of the 'Governing Classes'*,⁷⁴ is deliberately situating Medea at the forefront of the early campaign for women's independence. And that his burlesque spoke to a whole generation of theatre-goers, and not just those who had seen Ristori's performance, is borne out by the numerous revivals of the play in the late 1850s and well into the 1860s, where the role of Medea attracted star performers other than Robson.⁷⁵

The Mother's Tragedy

The last group of Medea plays to emerge, however, were in every sense tragic dramas, and the heroine was in these invariably played by a woman. The first overlapped with the very last, tortuous debates about the divorce bill, which continued to grind through parliamentary debates into 1857, itself competing for attention in the newspaper columns with the sensational trial of one of the most famous of all Victorian murderesses, Madeleine Smith. Smith had had a secret relationship with Pierre Émile L'Angelier; under Scots law at that date their intercourse, following an engagement to marry, itself constituted marriage. When her father sought to marry her to someone else, L'Angelier threatened to inform him of the facts; instead he died of poison, almost certainly at her hands. But a verdict of not proven was

returned after a brilliant defence by John Inglis, Dean of the Faculty of Advocates; the press and the public overwhelmingly supported her, seeing her as taking ‘righteous revenge against an exploitative seducer’.⁷⁶ This reaction shows how much women’s vulnerability to men—even if it led them to murder—was now informing opinion.

The Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act was finally passed at the end of the long, hot August of 1857.⁷⁷ In legalizing divorce for ordinary people, it remains the most important landmark in British marriage law. It also slightly lessened the unfairness women faced by giving them more equal access to divorce (although full equality was not secured until 1923), and protecting women’s property and earnings from seizure by their former husbands. Once a man had abandoned his wife he could no longer expropriate her money. Custody of children could also now be awarded to the mother if the court saw fit (which in practice rarely happened). Medea would now theoretically, at least, be able to keep the children if she could persuade a judge it was in their interests; she could also remarry or earn money without interference from her former husband.⁷⁸ But the Act also made it much easier for the Jasons of the world to leave their wives for new partners, and to abandon their responsibilities towards their offspring.

The details of these legislative measures were being finalized in the summer of 1857, when Sadler’s Wells staged John Heraud’s *Medea in Corinth*. This offered a London public drawn from across the class spectrum the first of what was to become a series of mid-Victorian tragic *Medeas* in English. More systematically than even Brough’s burlesque, Heraud’s tragedy subjects the issues surrounding the divorce bill to agonizing scrutiny through the medium of the myth of Medea. Heraud, a liberal Huguenot by descent, and a frequent guest of Carlyle,⁷⁹ was convinced that ordinary people’s sensibilities could be educated by the theatre. He had led the campaign for the Repeal of the Theatrical Patents Act in 1843, which had broken the stranglehold of the patent theatres, making it possible to

produce serious spoken drama at theatres other than Drury Lane, Covent Garden, the Haymarket, and the Theatre Royal in each provincial town. He had been supported in this by his friend Thomas Talfourd, the instigator of the Infant Custody Bill.⁸⁰

Heraud's major occupation was drama critic of the *Illustrated London News*, but he also wrote two other plays putting the position of women at the centre of the agenda, *Videna; or, the Mother's Tragedy* (Marylebone Theatre, 1854), and *Wife or no Wife* (Haymarket, 1855). He educated his daughter Edith enthusiastically, encouraging her to read Schelling and Shakespeare in her early teens. She starred in her father's 1857 *Medea* at Sadler's Wells, and recalled that this version, which used far more Euripides than Legouv e, 'was acknowledged by the public press to be superior to those that had preceded it'.⁸¹ The audience were greatly excited by her 'singularly powerful acting', and the production was transferred to Liverpool.⁸²

Besides other productions, two years later Heraud's *Medea* was revived at the thoroughly demotic Standard Theatre on Shoreditch High Street in the East End. After renovations in 1850 and 1854, the Standard had the largest capacity of any auditorium in Britain; it could seat five thousand, two thousand more than Drury Lane or Covent Garden. The audiences included the poorest residents of London, who needed to pay only 3d. for the gallery. The fantastic success of the theatre in the 1850s inspired spectators to arrive on trains from up to twenty miles away. The manager, John Douglass, was determined to bring theatrical Classics to the masses; in 1854–5 he staged Shakespeare and *The Duchess of Malfi*. *Medea*, starring Edith Heraud, was part of this highbrow programme, and scored one of Douglass's two great successes in 1859, running for twelve nights.⁸³ This means that it was seen in that year alone by up to 60,000 individuals.

Edith Heraud commented later on the unexpected success enjoyed by the adapted ancient play in the theatre of the ordinary working people of London:

. . . one of the weekly papers remarked that it was surprising that a play of Greek origin should be acted at the East End—that it should be understood, and its sentiments frequently applauded. Another triumph . . . another instance of the good effected by the repeal of the Patents. Not only was the Shakespearian and poetic drama enthusiastically welcomed by the million, but the severer Greek tragedy was kindly accepted and appreciated by them. Of the truth of my father's theory that the stage was the popular educator, what further proof was needed?⁸⁴

That the sentiments in Heraud's tragedy on the theme of Medea were 'frequently applauded' is hardly surprising given the climate of the 1850s, when divorce and the iniquities suffered by women and children had remained at the top of the agenda consistently since the Royal Commission was inaugurated in 1850.

Heraud transparently transfers contemporary discussion of divorce and women's rights to the context of ancient Corinth. Jason is in love with Creusa, but also wants custody of the children. Creon asks Jason what he is going to do about Medea. Jason replies, 'I publicly repudiate and divorce her', and asks Creusa to adopt the children.⁸⁵ Aegeus, in this version the voice of reason, is mindful that the paternal prerogative over custody is no longer uncontested: he responds to Jason by asking him if he would defy

The angry curses of a wronged wife?

The malice of a deserted mother?

Her children's cries, from her caresses snatched?⁸⁶

The potential disadvantages of divorce for women are scrutinized in a discussion between Medea and Jason, which draws heavily on the Euripidean interchanges between these estranged spouses. Jason begs Medea to grant him a divorce, to ‘immolate’ herself for the sake of the children. Greece has apparently already passed a Divorce Act, because Jason says to his wife, ‘By our laws, divorce is not | As perjury regarded’. But Medea apparently opposes the improvement of access to divorce to philandering husbands:

Laws—laws—laws!

But justice so regards, who would not
Women should suffer more than man the wrongs
Of man’s inconstancy.⁸⁷

Jason responds by asserting his rights over the custody of children, who will ‘find paternal refuge | ’Neath Creon’s palace-roof’. But Medea delivers a scornful tirade expressing the wrongs of women under Greek (English) law:

’Tis safely planned.

Ingenious, too. Again your man-made laws,
Framed to suppress the rights of subject woman,
By nature meant to know but a first love,
Formed like the swan to be one only mate.
Therein our sex is nobler far than yours. . .
My boys, you say, will dwell in royal halls,
But what, meanwhile, will be the mother’s doom?⁸⁸

Like most Victorians, Heraud's Medea believes in women's 'natural' monogamy. In the mid-eighteenth century women's sexual appetite had often been seen as potentially voracious (see above, Ch. 3, pp. 000); by 1840, however, it had become the common sense of the middle classes that nature had bestowed upon men and women essentially different bodies and psychologies but complementary roles.⁸⁹ Yet she also supports women's rights, for the speech draws attention to two injustices which the 1857 Act was intended to alleviate—father's absolute rights to children over seven, and the blighted, manless future of separated women. Jason is not allowed to retain rights over the sons, for Aegeus intervenes:

Let him who loveth not
His offspring be the first to tear away
The children from the mother.⁹⁰

Jason then allows Medea to take *one* of the boys, although in the event, terrified by their mother's strange behaviour, they both choose to go with Creusa.

Like Legouvé's version, Heraud's allows Medea to kill the children to save them from the Corinthians, but she blames Jason more emphatically for their deaths. Heraud's tragedy was successful in staging an English-language tragedy derived from Euripides' *Medea* because it was a provocative response to its times. It continued to excite audiences at more minor venues, and to enjoy revivals for years at both the Standard and at Sadler's Wells: it was almost certainly Heraud's version of Euripides' tragedy which was still being 'daringly presented' by 'the dignified Jennie Maurice' at Sadler's Wells in 1873.⁹¹

The Subjection of Women and the Murder of Children

The divorce act of 1857 still left women with unequal access to divorce, for which they could only apply on the ground of adultery *aggravated* by incest, bigamy, or cruelty, while men could divorce their wives on the ground of adultery alone. But the small steps which the act had taken to equalize men's and women's rights provoked the reconsideration of marriage which remained a prominent feature of public discourse throughout the next two decades,⁹² and affected the nature of the fictions and myths through which the Victorians defined themselves. Even the myth of Perseus, Medusa, and Andromeda, consistently popular in Victorian art and literature, began to be interpreted and represented in subtly different ways: in the middle of the century it had offered an archetypal image of idealized patriarchal marriage, counterposing vanquished female wildness and idealized feminine acquiescence. But gradually the roles of Medusa and Andromeda altered, as marriage became seen as 'a less definitive way to tame woman's dangerous power.'⁹³

Women's rights received fresh support in the outburst of reforming activity following John Stuart Mill's election to the House of Commons in 1865 and the publication of his important essay (written in 1861), *The Subjection of Women*, in 1869.⁹⁴ In this essay Mill is almost certainly echoing Euripides, *Medea* 233–4 when he writes that 'the wife is the actual bond-servant of her husband', yet worse than a slave because she is unable to turn down the 'last familiarity' of her husband.⁹⁵ This decade saw the beginnings of serious campaigning for women's suffrage, and feminists pressing for women's rights to property and child custody. As a result, the Married Women's Property Acts of 1870 and 1882 made it possible for every married woman to make a will without her husband's agreement, and to hold property in her own name: the Infant Custody Acts of 1873 and 1886 gave mothers additional rights to appeal for custody of their children.⁹⁶ It is interesting to see the widening gap at this time between (male) academic writing on Medea, and the progressive female authors who were

reassessing her from a sympathetic standpoint. A learned editor of *Medea* could in 1873 still inform his schoolboy readers that Euripides disliked women, who included

persons with base and evil minds, persons whose profligacy was shameful, whose daring was great, whose ability to plot and intrigue for mischief was unequalled. The quality remains to some extent in the race to the present day, as we see in the use of women as spies &c. by Russia.⁹⁷

As late as 1887 a male translator of *Medea* excises Medea's first monologue 'with an eye to the dramatic effect'.⁹⁸ Yet the (uncut) translation of Mill's associate Augusta Webster, a prominent campaigner for women's suffrage and education, was published in 1868, and in her poetic monologue *Medea in Athens* the heroine insightfully comments on her relationship with Jason.⁹⁹ Webster was persuasive: the reviewer of her translation in the *Athenaeum* can now write:

. . . the subject, if not grand, is one of general interest, being confined to no time, place or class of society. It is also one which a lady might naturally be expected to handle with success as she must be able to enter fully in to the feelings of the unfortunate heroine in her distressing condition.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, in *Adam Bede* (1859) George Eliot compares Hetty Sorrel, a victim of seduction and an infanticide, with Medea; in *Felix Holt* (1866) the analogy between Mrs Transome, whom her former lover Jermyn wishes to sever from her son, is ironically developed.¹⁰¹

Medea continued to appear regularly on the London stage, in both burlesques and tragedies, throughout this period of hectic legislation. Parliamentary debates were of course

not the sole explanation. By the 1860s sensational murder trials, especially those involving women motivated by revenge, had become a public fascination. Yet even this development was connected with social change. Criminologists have perceived a pattern whereby murders by women during this period were increasingly practised for reasons connected less with a desire for respectability or with life-threatening poverty, but with ‘new—and disappointed—expectations about their status and rights within marriage’.¹⁰² Women were ardent followers of the twists and turns of the trials. Robert Altick has remarked upon the ‘striking Victorian paradox’ whereby middle-class women, brought up to pride themselves on the delicacy of their sensibilities, and to faint at the thought of drowning a kitten, revelled in the gory details of murder trials.¹⁰³

Similar fascinations mark the fiction of the period. The ‘fad genre’ of the 1860s and early 1870s was sensational fiction, related to stage melodrama; important examples were Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862), Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1860), and Ellen Wood’s *East Lynne*, first serialized in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1860.¹⁰⁴ The success of these novels, many of which were written by women, rested on their assertive heroines, and their display of ‘female anger, frustration, and sexual energy’,¹⁰⁵ all of which were of course also offered by the story of Medea. Lady Audley is a golden-haired murderess. Isabel Vane in *East Lynne* is the archetypal heroine of sensationalized ‘maternal melodrama’, which squeezed every drop of emotion out of mothers’ separations from their offspring:¹⁰⁶ locked in a loveless marriage and obsessed by her husband’s adultery, she actually abandons her children. For the female protagonists of this fiction are often depicted as escaping from their families and repudiating conventional ideals of motherhood and femininity through ‘illness, madness, divorce, flight, and ultimately, murder’.¹⁰⁷ Medea perhaps no longer seemed so very different from other heroines in popular culture.

Another issue which made Medea seem relevant was anxiety about child-killing. Victorian fiction and melodrama had always enjoyed dwelling on the lachrymose deaths of children (one need think only of Little Nell),¹⁰⁸ but child-murder was different. In the early 1860s the public was stunned to learn that no fewer than 298 coroners' verdicts of wilful murder of children found dead on the streets of London were given between 1855 and 1860. Scores of children's corpses—mostly infants—were found abandoned in the city every year, and in 'The Function of Criticism at the Present Time' (1864), Matthew Arnold cites a case of alleged infanticide as a reminder of the realities that reside behind self-satisfied myths about Victorian culture.¹⁰⁹ The Infant Life Protection Act of 1872 tried to curb the inordinately high number of infant deaths; a serious debate was under way whether these children died because of their mothers' poverty or culpable irresponsibility.¹¹⁰

It is in this context that tragedies on the theme of Medea remained popular: they were all adaptations, like Heraud's, of Euripides combined with Legouv . The durability of Legouv 's version was a result of its compatibility with nineteenth-century notions of femininity. One reviewer (perhaps Heraud) noted approvingly that Legouv  had tried to 'humanize' the terrifying heroine,

and to bring her and her acts within the sphere of our moral sentiments. He is careful from the beginning to make her exhibit the feelings of maternity to an excessive degree; and attributes the catastrophe to a revolt of those feelings. . . . There is in this a natural motive supplied, wanting in the original story.¹¹¹

Legouv  was felt to have 'improved' on Euripides by making Medea's primary motive the 'natural' one of maternal love, rather than the apparently 'unnatural' reactions to her faithless spouse of sexual jealousy, wrath, or vindictiveness.

The barbarian heroine became part of the repertoire of touring female virtuoso actresses, and thus was often played in London by appropriately foreign performers. In 1861, for example, two different actresses played versions of Legouv e’s tragedy at major London theatres. The American Matilda Heron did not impress in her own English-language version at the Lyceum in April of that year; she alienated her audience by her stiff, Continental, style of acting. Edward Blanchard felt it ‘very bad’.¹¹² But the smaller, gentler Avonia Jones, described variously as American or Australian, did rather better at Drury Lane in November.¹¹³

Medea in the 1870s

The most exotic actress to appear as Medea after Ristori was Madame Francesca (Fanny) Janauschek, of Central European provenance, who starred in a version of Grillparzer’s, rather than Legouv e’s, treatment at the Haymarket in 1876. In her performance the emphasis was much less upon the divorce issue. Medea’s ethnicity had not been a preoccupation of the earlier Victorian theatre (although it is possible that there was a racial element in the ruse employed by Medea in Mark Lemon’s 1856 burlesque, where she had daubed her rival’s complexion with toxic black paint).¹¹⁴ Yet Janauschek’s interpretation of Grillparzer’s trilogy (which was written against a background of pogroms in Austria) now spoke to contemporary experiences of empire rather than to issues of gender, for she emphasized the barbarous, oriental character embodied in Grillparzer’s Hasidic Medea, contrasted with the civilized Creusa. This version never even asks whether the children might prefer to be with their natural mother rather than with Jason’s white-skinned new bride: Jason insists, and Creusa agrees, that the children self-evidently must not ‘grow to manhood in a | Foreign, barbarous clime’.¹¹⁵ This type of Medea consistently attracted the painters of the period, who neglected Euripides’ abandoned mother in favour of the visual potential offered by the exotic sorceress

of the *Argonautica* and her derivatives in, for example, Charles Kingsley's *The Heroes* (1855) and William Morris's *Life and Death of Jason* (1867).¹¹⁶ Madame Janauschek's failure to present herself as her husband's victim may have been one reason for her unpopularity, and she further estranged an audience used to sympathizing with Medea by the declamatory style she favoured. This went down well in Germany, Austria, and Russia, but was disliked in England.¹¹⁷

For in tragedy the British wanted a pretty Medea whom they could pity. The curious flipside of Victorian sexism, which was confused about women's competence as moral agents, was the reluctance to find them criminally responsible for infanticide. Between 1849 and 1877 only three female child-murderers suffered capital punishment in Britain, the most famous being a real-life Medea. Ann Lawrence's execution caused a sensation in 1864, after she vented her rage on her four-year-old son when she found that her lover was unfaithful.¹¹⁸ Lawrence died because she was too like Euripides' vindictive Medea and too unlike Legouvé's altruistic mother. The Victorians needed Medea to be a tender model of maternal devotion, and favoured the lovely young Isabel Bateman in the role, which she performed with remarkable success in William Gordon Wills's tragedy *Medea in Corinth* in the summer of 1872 at the Lyceum.¹¹⁹ An engraving appeared in the *Illustrated London News* (Fig. 14.4), significantly reassuring its readership that Bateman 'shines in the display of motherly emotion'.¹²⁰

John Heraud, as drama critic of the *Illustrated London News*, compared Wills' play, his own, and Euripides', objecting with some justification that Wills' rhetoric was florid.¹²¹ Yet Wills' play was admired by others: a 'distinguished' critic complimented Wills on the way he had 'skilfully remoulded the matter afforded him by Euripides, and . . . ably fitted the action to the requirements and the condition of the modern stage'.¹²² For Wills had indeed 'remoulded' the play to create an emotional drama which spoke to his audience's concerns

about divorce. This adaptation is unusual (and perhaps more true to the way in which Euripides' play was understood by its original audience of Athenian males) in presenting both spouses as individuals with understandable problems. Medea speaks scornfully of Jason's hypocritical use of arguments from the children's welfare to disguise his own self-interested motives, 'mouthing here of love and care paternal, | The interests of thy children as thy motives'. Yet Jason is stranded in a loveless marriage to a heathen, a 'barbarian cursed of our Gods, | And by our Grecian laws I may divorce her'. Creon, however, has read the 1857 Divorce Act, and warns Jason that he cannot divorce Medea, who has committed no fault, without her consent, 'For this is vital in our Grecian law'.¹²³

The last important Victorian Medea was Geneviève Ward, an American-born artist, educated in Europe (Fig. 14.5). One of her first tragic roles was Medea, whom she acted in a version of Legouv e's tragedy in Dublin, Liverpool, Hull, and London between 1873 and 1876. Her performance was enhanced by her contralto voice, stately figure, and intelligence.¹²⁴ Ward certainly saw the connections between Medea and the contemporary debates about women's rights, which during the 1870s had begun to focus on the issue of marital violence. This led to the passing in 1878 of the Matrimonial Causes Act, which added assault to the grounds on which a woman could legally separate from her husband. Ward asked herself how Medea would react if she was the victim of battering, and assumed that she would not have tolerated the kind of everyday abuse meted out to working-class British women by their husbands. In one production the 4-year-old daughter of the property man was to play Medea's younger child, but became frightened. Ward reports that her mother endeavoured to soothe her, 'a sad-faced woman, who probably accepted all hardships and ill-usage from her lawful master as meekly as Medea fiercely resented her wrongs'.¹²⁵

Prefigurative Medea

Performances of plays about Medea disappeared at the time of the passing of the last pieces of significant Victorian marriage legislation in the early 1880s. This period coincided with the transformations in attitudes to Greek tragedy which are to be the subject of the next two chapters—they entailed the death of classical burlesque, a growing dislike of the neoclassical school of adaptation exemplified by Legouvé, and academic experiments with performing Greek drama, unadapted, in the ancient language. The outrageous Medea did not appeal to those who selected the plays for educational productions: suitable pedagogical models of femininity were identified in *Alcestis* or *Antigone*.

In subsequent chapters it will also be seen that the burlesqued and tragic Medeas of the mid-Victorian era prefigured the appearance of the New Woman on the British stage at the end of the nineteenth century. Far from being an interloper from Scandinavia, prototypes for this New Woman, so widely associated with Ibsen, have been found in the mid-Victorian British plays based on *Medea*. But the burlesque Medea, in particular, is far from simply the traditional victim of melodrama; on the contrary, as is typical of the heroines of the burlesque tradition that adopted her so readily, she has cunning, resolve and experience behind her that enable and indeed force her to break out of the traditional Victorian feminine mould. Collectively these mid-Victorian Medeas are also the ancestors of the Edwardian Medea adopted by the Suffragettes (see below, pp. 000) and of the many hundred Medeas to have argued their cases on the stages of the world since the Women's Liberation Movement of the early 1970s.

There have been many productions over the last three decades, including the commercial successes achieved by Diana Rigg in the 1990s and Fiona Shaw in the third millennium. When the story of Medea's recent stage appearances comes to be written, connections will be drawn between the upsurge of interest in Euripides' tragedy and legislative activity around sex discrimination, equal pay, equal opportunities, divorce, child

custody, and, more recently, wives' retaliation against abusive husbands. But Medea's relationship with legislative change has had a rather longer history. By the end of the Victorian era she was already a veteran, having spent over half a century in the vanguard of the campaign for women's emancipation.

Notes

- 1 For the growing literature on the reception of Medea see e.g. Mimoso-Ruiz (1982), Uglione (1997), Clauss and Johnston (1997), 3–5; Hall, Macintosh, and Taplin (2000).
- 2 Boas (1914), appendix 4.
- 3 For the probable influence of Seneca's *Medea* on Shakespeare, see Purkiss (1996), 259. Lines and sentiments identical to some in Euripides' *Medea* are spoken by both Livia and Isabella in Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (c.1620). The anonymous female author of a tragedy featuring an oriental murderess acted at Lincoln's Inn Fields in 1698 knew Euripides' *Medea*: 'A Young Lady' (1698), 49.
- 4 Edward FitzGerald, letter of 16 June 1872, in FitzGerald (1889), i. 340
- 5 Anon. (1826). The audience was provided with an Italian text and facing English translation; in the latter he was called 'Ægeus' (ibid. 13, 19, etc.).
- 6 Robinson (1872), ii. 56. On Pasta's performance see Margaret Reynolds (2000), 132–6, with fig. 10.
- 7 Noverre (1804), pp. iii f.; Roberdeau (1804), 34 and n.; Guest (1972), 150.
- 8 Shanley (1981–2), 357.
- 9 Wolfram (1987), 147.
- 10 Shanley (1989), 22–5; Chedzoy (1992), 170–3.
- 11 See Lawrence Stone (1995), 178.
- 12 See 'Divorce', *The Law Review*, 1 (1844–5), 353–81.
- 13 Addison and Howell (1872).
- 14 Rutherford (1992).
- 15 *ILN* 6, no. 152 (29 Mar. 1845), 200.
- 16 Cited by Auerbach (1987), 58.
- 17 Fletcher (1987), 9.
- 18 Bratton (1992), 87.
- 19 Fletcher (1987), 31.
- 20 Bratton (1992), 88; Senelick (1993), 82.
- 21 Zeitlin (1996).
- 22 Appleton (1974).
- 23 Ibid. 159–61; George Taylor (1989), 71–2.
- 24 Aelian, *Historical Miscellany* 5. 21.
- 25 Planché (1845), 158.
- 26 Ibid. 161.
- 27 Ibid. 167–8; cf. Euripides, *Medea* 627–62.
- 28 Planché (1845), 170–1.
- 29 Planché (1845), 20–1.
- 30 Lawrence Stone (1995), 351.
- 31 Cretkovich (1992), 46; Christopher Parker (1995), 2.
- 32 British Library Add. MSS 43036, fos. 276–307.
- 33 Planché (1845), 155.
- 34 Wooler (1851), 287.
- 35 See Lord Byron (1970), 34: 'Translation of The Nurse's Dole in the *Medea* of Euripides' (June 1810): 'Oh how I wish that an embargo | Had kept in port the good ship Argo! | Who, still unlaunch'd from Grecian docks, | Had never pass'd the Azure rocks; | But now I fear her trip will be a | Damn'd business for my Miss Medea'; cf. above, p. 000.
- 36 Wooler (1851), 290, 299.
- 37 Ibid. 28.

- 38 Ibid. 308.
- 39 Shanley (1989), 158.
- 40 *ILN* 29, no. 811 (19 July 1856), 65. The reviewer was probably John Heraud (see below).
- 41 Legouvé (1893), ii, 47–8.
- 42 Ward and Whiting (1918), 187.
- 43 Ristori (1907), 175.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid. 42–3, 59, 72, 80, 107. The translation, by Joseph Montanelli, was published to accompany Ristori’s London performance, offering a parallel English version by Thomas Williams: *Medea: A Tragedy in Three Acts* (London, 1856).
- 46 Ristori (1907), 179–81.
- 47 Lewes (1875) 44, 145.
- 48 Medea had been the anti-heroine in the parody of Longepierre’s *Médée* Dominique and Biancolelli, *La Méchante Femme* (1728); the Cherubini burlesques were C. Sewrin’s *La Sorcière* (27 March), P. A. Capelle and P. Villiers’ *Bébé et Jargon* (Théâtre Montasier, 28 March) and Bizet and H. Chaussier’s *Médée ou l’Hôpital des fous* (Théâtre de L’Ambigu, 15 April). See Travers (1941), 27, 111; Macintosh (2000a), 12, (2000b), 84.
- 49 Lemon (1856), 1.
- 50 Mimoso-Ruiz (1978), 485.
- 51 Lemon (1856), 26.
- 52 Ibid. 16.
- 53 Ibid. 17.
- 54 Ibid. 6.
- 55 Ibid. 5.
- 56 *ILN* 29, no. 811 (19 July 1856), 65.
- 57 For the programme see Robert Brough (1856). The joke refers to yet another legislative controversy concerned with marriage, the long-running attempt to remove the ban on a man marrying his deceased wife’s sister. Bills on this issue had been debated and defeated in both 1849 and 1856. See Shanley (1989), 41.
- 58 Robert Brough (1856), 8–10.
- 59 Ibid. 11.
- 60 Ibid. 22–3, 33.
- 61 Lewes (1875), 166.
- 62 Ibid. 70.
- 63 Burnand (1880), 23.
- 64 Robert Brough (1856), 25.
- 65 Sands (1979), 77; Sala (1864), 49.
- 66 Morley (1866), 95–9, 159 (entry dated 1 Nov. 1856).
- 67 Burnand (1880), 22–3.
- 68 Dickens (1965–2002), viii. 171, to Macready, 8 Aug. 1856.
- 69 *The Freeman’s Journal*, cit. Sands (1979), 79; Sala (1864), 19, 49.
- 70 *ILN* 29, no. 811 (19 July 1856), 65.
- 71 Robert Brough (1856), 23.
- 72 Ibid. 33 and n.
- 73 Ibid. (1856), 34.
- 74 See Robert Brough (1890).
- 75 Notably the actor-manager of the Grecian Theatre, George Conquest, who appeared in a popular revival in 1861. See Hackney Archives Department, Playbill no. 467.
- 76 Hartman (1985), 52–4.
- 77 For a detailed account see Shanley (1989), 35–44.
- 78 The Act would have transformed the life of Helen Faucit’s mother Harriet, who had always been the breadwinner of the family. After the failure of her marriage she was condemned to live not only in poverty but ‘in sin’ with her new partner, and her subsequent children suffered terribly from the stigma of illegitimacy. See Carlyle (2000).
- 79 *ODNB* xxvi. 648–9.
- 80 Edith Heraud (1898), 91.
- 81 Ibid. 128–9.
- 82 *ILN* 31, no. 873 (15 Aug. 1857), 163; *ILN* 31, no. 876 (29 Aug. 1857), 219.
- 83 Allan Stuart Jackson (1993), 6, 112, 124.
- 84 Edith Heraud (1898), 128–9.

- 85 Heraud (1857), 17–18.
86 Ibid. 18.
87 Ibid. 20–5.
88 Ibid. 22.
89 Davidoff and Hall (1987), 149.
90 John Heraud (1857), 31.
91 *ILN* 61, no. 1714 (13 July 1872), 43; Arundel (1965), 164.
92 Shanley (1981–2), 356.
93 Munich (1989), 32–7.
94 For a recent edition with useful introduction, notes, and bibliography see Mansfield (1980).
95 Mill (1869), 55, 57.
96 Shanley (1989), 14.
97 John Hogan (1873), p. xxv.
98 Blew (1887), ix.
99 Webster (1868), (1870), 1–13. See Hardwick (1997), 2–4. On Webster’s political activity see Leighton (1992), 164–201.
100 *Athenaeum*, no. 2135 (26 Sept. 1868).
101 Jenkyns (1980), 115–17, 125–7, Hurst (2003), 103–37.
102 Hartman (1985), 263.
103 Altick (1970), 42.
104 Cretkovich (1992), 15–22. For a discussion of *Lady Audley’s Secret* see Bernstein (1997), 73–103.
105 Showalter (1977), 182.
106 Cvetkovich (1992), 112–13.
107 Showalter (1997), 182–3.
108 Nina Auerbach (1990), 24, 96. For a comprehensive study, see McDonagh (2003).
109 Shanley (1989), 87, 90; Arnold (1986), 145–6.
110 Hoffer and Hull (1984); see also Lionel Rose (1986), 35–45.
111 *ILN* 28, no. 804 (7 June 1856), 619.
112 *ILN* 38, no. 1086 (27 Apr. 1861), 389; Heron (1861); Blanchard (1891), i. 256; see also *ILN*, loc. cit.
113 *ILN* 39, no. 1116 (9 Nov. 1861), 469; Blanchard (1891), i. 263.
114 Lemon (1856), 16 (see also above, p. 000).
115 Anon., *Medea*, British Library Add. MSS 53167 E, 21. For Grillparzer’s Hasidic *Medea* see Macintosh (2000a), 13–14, 19–21.
116 Kestner (1989), 40, 45, 55–6, 170.
117 Maude (1903), 161–2.
118 Lionel Rose (1986), 76–7; see also Patrick Wilson (1971). One Rebecca Smith had been executed in 1849 after admitting to killing no fewer than eight of her children (Rose, 76).
119 Blanchard (1891), ii. 414. Bateman was born in America and came to England in her teens.
120 *ILN* 61, no. 1715 (20 July 1872), 65.
121 *ILN* 61, no. 1714 (13 July 1872), 43.
122 Unfortunately this critic is not named in the source citing these words, which is Freeman Wills (1898), 90.
123 W. G. Wills(1872).
124 Gustafson (1881), 119, 130.
125 G. Ward (1881), 127–8. Another American, Charles Bristed, who studied Classics at Cambridge in the 1840s, was scandalized by the treatment of women in England. It was the standard practice of English gentlemen, he writes, to abuse working-class women sexually, and he has seen more brutality to women than in any other European country except Russia. ‘The cases of aggravated assault and battery upon women that come before the London police-magistrates are positively startling in number and degree’ (Bristed (1852), 347 and n.)