

Madame Medea: European Reimaginings in the 19th Century

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The idea for this independent study came to me while taking a class on classical mythology in the spring of 2018. I have always been a fan of Greek tragedies, having written about Sophocles' *Antigone* in high school, but what stuck with me this time was Euripides' *Medea*. Like I did for *Antigone*, I found myself rooting for Medea throughout nearly the entire play. Euripides presented Medea as such a tormented victim of circumstance that I couldn't help but sympathize with her. The final act, however, is what gripped me. One of my favorite things about the ending of *Antigone* is that, though *Antigone's* suicide is heartbreaking, king Creon (the obvious villain) gets what he deserves in the end. But in *Medea*, when Medea becomes the villain, she is never reprimanded by mortal or divine forces. Instead, it is Jason who is left devastated. Yet, unlike a traditional tragic hero, Jason is difficult to sympathize with. It is Euripides' ability to twist and play with the roles of protagonist and antagonist that first drew me into the story and his emotionally deep and complex portrayal of the character of Medea that stayed with me long after the class ended. The goal of this project was to examine just a few of the different portrayals of this unique character during her nineteenth century revival and how these portrayals were manifested in contemporary visual arts of the period.

A foreign threat not only to her lover and children, but to society as a whole, Medea was the antithesis of the proper European lady. Nevertheless, audiences in France, Italy, and beyond couldn't get enough of the maniacal murderess both on the stage and in the art galleries. Beginning with an examination of the original Greek and Roman texts and visual sources, I considered how Medea transformed between the time of Euripides and of her modern revival. I studied Victorian ideologies surrounding women and mental illness and explored the contemporary art context in Europe and abroad, ultimately piecing together the how and why of Medea's theatrical characterizations and pulling apart the visual references embedded in her painted, sculpted, and printed visages. This research involved travelling to Boston and New York to meet with curators, access museum records, and, most importantly, to see the works I studied in person. The three main works I examined are Eugène Delacroix's *Médée furieuse* (fig. 1), William Wetmore Story's *Medea* (fig. 2) and Alphonse Mucha's *Médée* (fig. 3).

First and foremost, I would like to thank my independent study advisor, Professor Susan Wegner for guiding me through this semester-long project, as well as Professors Pamela Fletcher and Catherine Baker in the Classics department for looking over parts of it with me. I am especially thankful for Professor Baker's suggestion that I submit an abstract to the University of Tennessee at Knoxville Undergraduate Classics Conference, as I presented my work on Roman sarcophagi at this conference in February of 2019. Thank you to Asher Miller, curator of the exhibition *Delacroix* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for taking the time to meet with me and talk and for reserving me a ticket for David O'Brien's lecture called *Delacroix: To Observe and Imagine*. Thank you as well to Dennis Carr, at the Museum of Fine Arts for allowing me to dig through your records and for the generous gift of *American Figurative Art at the Museum of Fine Arts*. Lastly, thank you to Joachim Homann, curator at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art and my internship supervisor, for allowing me to see the Museum's copy of Mucha's *Médée* and to peek at the poster's object file. Some of my research on *Médée* will appear in the Museum's upcoming collections catalogue *Art Purposes: Object Lessons for the Liberal Arts*.

Faculty Mentor: Susan Wegner

Illustrations



Figure 1: Eugène Delacroix, *Médée furieuse*, 1838, oil on canvas, Ref. P 542, Palais Beaux-Arts Lille, Lille, France.



Figure 2: William Wetmore Story, *Medea* (originally *Medea Meditating the Death of her Children*), about 1868-1880, marble, 1984.202, The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



Figure 3: Alphonse Mucha, *Médée*, 1898, 2011.55, lithograph on paper, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, Maine.