

A New Medea: Staging Conjugal Passion in Eighteenth-Century Europe

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One of the best-known lines from Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* is Marwood's exclamation »Sieh in mir eine neue Medea!«² This »new Medea« is introduced in a drama commonly regarded as the first bourgeois tragedy – in other words, a work that consciously rejects the rules of classicist tragedy. Even though the overt reference to antiquity might be considered an alien element in Lessing's challenge to classicism, it could also speak to the skills of adaptation developed by eighteenth-century authors in Europe.³ And indeed, a closer look at the role of antiquity in the works of Lessing and some of his contemporaries suggests an intent to mold classical themes and genres, to respond to a new set of ideals of performance and acting as well as to varying local conditions of Europe's cultural centers.⁴ Lessing's »new Medea« is not only a figure in his first bourgeois tragedy; in some form or another, her presence was felt on stages all over Europe during the second half of the eighteenth century.⁵

Among the conceptual divides separating antiquity from the eighteenth century were ideals regarding sexuality. In his book *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution*, Faramerz Dabhoiwala suggests that the eighteenth century saw an unprecedented rise in sexual freedom, based on the increased acceptance of the sexual act as natural and healthy as well as heightened insistence on personal liberty within the private sphere.⁶ However, this shift applied predominately to male members of society, a fact that became more and more apparent as the century progressed. Indeed, the sexual revolution of the eighteenth century was predicated upon the victimization of women. Prostitutes and fallen women were to an increasing degree pitied, especially in fiction, and seen as »innocent victims of seduction by bawds and rakes« (155). As Dabhoiwala observes, this ties into a broader eighteenth-century trend of defining women as passive, asexual beings, representative of »feminine« virtue. The eponymous protagonist of Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson* is a case in point. She is a victim of seduction and false promises, and at the same time she resists sensual pleasure (*WB* 3: 1213). Marwood, the Medea figure of the drama, is a complex character who exposes male double standards concerning sexuality; she is also the villain of the story, ultimately killing her rival, Sara.⁷

In the context of late eighteenth-century sensibility, Lessing's heroine Sara served as a foil to the vengeful Marwood, creating a constellation of ideals of femininity that invited comparison with contemporaneous interpretations of the Medea story. In fact, Sara's as well as Marwood's traits contributed to shaping the new Medea. As Edith Hall puts it, Euripides's complex heroine had to be subjected to »radical surgery« in order to conform to the norms of the century.⁸ This surgery led to a high degree of variety in Medea dramas, with each seeking a slightly different solution to the delicate problems of representing the princess from Colchis. There was, however, one point on which all eighteenth-century treatments seemed to agree: the overt references to sexuality in Euripides's and Seneca's tragedies had to be omitted.⁹ In fact, the entire plot was subject to change, and there was no shortage of attempts to squeeze the protagonist into a more acceptable box of eighteenth-century femininity. Even though Medea might appear to be an unlikely candidate for this makeover, a number of authors were attracted to the character. In the second half of the eighteenth century, she

served as a representation of the conflict between Sara's virtue and Marwood's vice, part of an ongoing reinterpretation of femininity and sexuality.¹⁰

In this essay, I consider how sexuality and gender are represented in three European Medea dramas that display this very conflict: Richard Glover's tragedy *Medea* (1761), Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter's melodrama *Medea* (1775), and Jean-Marie-Bernard Clément's tragedy *Médée* (1779). I argue that the trope of the victimization of women is a literary device that transforms Medea from a sexually outspoken agent in antiquity into an asexual mother in eighteenth-century Europe. The goal of this essay is to shed light on the transformations that the eighteenth-century Medea figure undergoes, showing how issues of sexuality and gender were adapted to conform to the generic and ideological parameters of domestic tragedy, while at the same time paving the way for the success of celebrity actresses.

Glover, Gotter, Clément, and the Dragon Chariot

Richard Glover's tragedy, first printed in 1761, was performed at Drury Lane in London in 1767, featuring the celebrated Mrs. Yates as Medea.¹¹ Four editions of this text appeared in 1761 and 1762 alone, and it was included in the widely read collection *Bell's British Theatre* from the 1770s to the 1790s.¹² Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter's *Medea* is an early example of melodrama, a fashionable genre that was new in eighteenth-century Germany and combined spoken dialogue with music. Gotter's *Medea* was first performed in Gotha in 1775, and its widespread success on stages from Vienna and Trieste to Copenhagen and Warsaw was mirrored by the wide dissemination of the printed text.¹³ It was reprinted more than fifteen times before Gotter published a new version in his collection of *Gedichte* in 1788.¹⁴ As a theatrical performance, Jean-Marie-Bernard Clément's *Médée* proved the least successful of the three; it was performed only once, at Comédie-Française, in Paris, in 1779. The play's printed version suffered a similar fate, falling behind its German and British peers in sales.¹⁵ Although the three dramas were written in different languages and each adapted the narrative to specific local circumstances, they nevertheless shared an ideological frame. Each of the three treatments of this tale found a way to portray Medea in a manner that inspires more pity than fear.

In the first scene of Gotter's melodrama, Medea appears in her dragon chariot, descends, and enters a colonnade in the palace of King Creon of Corinth, at which point the chariot, in the shape of a cloud, disappears.¹⁶ Gotter's strategy is a very conscious reversal of the final scene of Euripides's tragedy, where Medea leaves as a »goddess from the machine« in her grandfather Helios's dragon chariot.¹⁷ The Athenian tragedy ends with Medea's triumph, a triumph that quells her human aspects in favor of her divine lineage.¹⁸ Gotter's treatment skilfully turns the tables, and obviously presupposes an audience that can appreciate and understand the significance of the melodrama's opening scene. By beginning in this manner, Gotter implies that Medea is primarily to be seen as a human being, a woman: by descending, she literally and figuratively steps down from her claims to divinity.¹⁹

The significance of Medea's entrance is underlined by the stage directions, which describe her emotional shift from »Zorn« to »Wehmuth« (5).²⁰ Her opening lines, in which she nostalgically reflects on the palace as her former residence, emphasize this point even more. There was a time, she exclaims, when this place was the sacred space of domestic happiness: »[v]ertrauter Wohnsitz, vormals den Schuzgöttern frommer Eintracht, häuslichen Glücks und unverbrüchlicher Treue heilig!« (5).²¹ The opening of the melodrama thus functions as a means to emphasize the domestic elements of Medea's story. The palace is not just a space of public life, the stock scenery of an eighteenth-century stage set, but a family home. Gotter's appeal to the audience is to envision Medea as an eighteenth-century character, a spouse reminiscing about bygone conjugal happiness.

It might come as a surprise that Gotter's melodrama concludes with Medea reentering the dragon chariot, in spite of the descent that takes place in the opening scene. She has killed her two sons, but she explains her deed as a means to save them from an even crueler fate at the hands of Creusa and Jason (17). In other words, the children's murder is justified in the play as a mother's attempt to shelter her children, even though the consequences of doing so are horrendous (10-11, 23).²² The chariot at the end of the work is a reminder that her passions have brought her to infanticide, and her removal from the stage is a logical consequence of her transgression.²³ In spite of this circular structure, the work's overall tendency is to depict a humanized Medea, a loving mother and faithful spouse who is driven to extremes by the treachery of her husband.

Clément's approach stands in stark contrast to Gotter's bold staging. Among other things, he dispenses entirely with the dragon chariot (in spite of the fact that it appears in Euripides's tragedy), claiming that it belongs to the »Théâtre des machines« (Préface, xij). To Clément, the use of machinery is out of the question, and in his preface to the tragedy he dwells on Euripides, Seneca, and his French precursors – most prominently, Longepierre, whose *Médée*, from 1694, was staged repeatedly in the eighteenth century – arguing for »un Théâtre uniquement consacré à la peinture du cœur humain, & au développement des passions« (iii). In order to attain this goal of a tragedy depicting the human heart and its passions, Clément argues that Médée cannot appear on stage as a sorceress in the Senecan style. Instead, she should be presented primarily as a loving but abandoned woman, »une femme que l'amour seul a conduite dans le crime; malheureuse & à plaindre, puisqu'elle est abandonnée« (iii).²⁴ In this facet Clément agrees with Glover and Gotter, although the latter two opted to keep the chariot.

Glover puts Medea on the chariot as a mere passenger (the vehicle is guided by Juno, who sends Medea away at the end of the tragedy, after preventing her suicide).²⁵ In contrast, Gotter uses the dragon chariot as a symbol for Medea's descent into womanhood. Finally, Clément rules out the dragon chariot because of his opposition against the French theatrical tradition of the marvelous, that is characterized by the display of supernatural elements on stage. These differences show how eighteenth-century authors, intent on representing Medea as a loving woman who suffers misfortunes as opposed to the superhuman demigoddess of classical treatments, adapted specific traits of the Medea story in varying ways.²⁶

But how does the play end in the eighteenth century, with or without the dragon chariot? To underline Medea's humanity and her adherence to contemporary conventions, Glover indeed performs »radical surgery« on the plot. But he does so in a way that, as Hall observes, »her virtues as wife and mother, astonishingly, emerge intact.«²⁷ Glover also deviates from Euripides's model in his treatment of Creusa, Medea's rival. Instead of falling victim to a poisoned veil or crown, as she did in the tragedy's classical incarnations, Creusa is spared in Glover's version. The act of revenge is directed against Creon. Medea also persists in her love for Jason, which is perhaps the most surprising alteration of all. It is noteworthy that King Aegeus, as well as Medea's new liaison to him, is omitted in all three of the dramas under discussion.²⁸ The murder of the children, even though it is performed in a state of »phrenzy,« has completely lost its function within Glover's plot.²⁹ Whereas Glover's play conforms to the ancient use of the dragon chariot at the end of the tragedy, its function has changed. Medea does not leave in triumph; on the contrary, it is Juno who drives the chariot, and sends a humbled Medea away into an unknown future. Guided by the priestess of Juno, Jason attains qualities of the clement, steadfast, and independent ruler, making him a model of eighteenth-century masculinity.³⁰

Gotter, as we have seen, ends his play with Medea reentering in the dragon chariot for a final debate with Jason. The doors of the palace open up and show the bodies of the two murdered sons. Medea expresses her love for the children, and Jason's retort that she

has killed them is answered by her justification: »Um sie zu retten« (23). Jason's role as a perjurer is underlined in one of Medea's last lines: the gods, she states, do not hear a man who has broken his oath.³¹ After turning to his dead sons and asking them for forgiveness, Jason commits suicide.

Clément remains closer to Euripides's tragedy in terms of plot and the depiction of the protagonist. His Médée uses dissimulation in her meeting with Creon, a strategy that is commonly seen as incompatible with sentimental femininity and the eighteenth-century stereotype of the innocent woman.³² She does not hide her feelings of love and rage, however, in her interaction with Jason. Clément's tragedy places Médée in the context of eighteenth-century domestic drama yet retains traits from the classicist seventeenth-century tradition in which guilty but pitiable women, such as Phèdre, serve as heroines. After the murder of her two sons, Clément's Médée is portrayed as a woman stripped of her magical powers, as a repentant victim of passion. She claims that her cruelty is the consequence of her love for Jason. The tragedy concludes with Médée's suicide, and her final lines to Jason focus on the dire price for amorous passion: »Je finis des remords que rien n'eût pu calmer, / Et me délivre enfin de l'horreur de t'aimer« (51). As Zoé Schweitzer has pointed out, the fact that Médée stabs herself both retains the crime – the infanticide – as a driving force of tragedy and simultaneously invites sympathy for Médée, since she is punished at the end of the tragedy.³³

Jason as an Eighteenth-Century Libertine

The above discussion serves as an example of how the three authors in question sought to change Medea into a character appealing to an eighteenth-century audience. But as we will see, the domestication of Medea also had consequences for the representation of Jason. As Dabhoiwala notes, a central feature in the eighteenth-century view of sexuality was »obsession with male predation.«³⁴ Eighteenth-century portrayals of seduction replaced the scheming and lustful temptress of earlier periods with the affectionate, innocent virgin, a clear victim of the cunning libertine and his »vicious amorality.«³⁵ Dabhoiwala uses Nicholas Rowe's reworking of the seventeenth-century play *The Fair Penitent* as an example. In its eighteenth-century incarnation, the main female character is transformed from »a ruthless adulteress« into »the tragic virgin.«³⁶ In Lessing's *Miss Sara Sampson*, both kinds of women are present: the scheming Marwood, as a double for Medea, and the victimized Sara. The victim presupposes a perpetrator, and as Simonetta Sanna has noted, the libertine takes the stage in the eighteenth century as an alternative to the Greek hero: »Der Abenteurer Iason nimmt in Mellefont die Züge des Libertins an: Er gleicht eher Don Giovanni als dem mythischen Iason.«³⁷

These two roles, the libertine man and the innocent woman, become integral parts of the Medea story during the second half of the eighteenth century. The prehistory of Jason's voyage to Colchis and his quest for the Golden Fleece is usually retold in the Medea dramas, from Euripides's tragedy onward. In Colchis Jason meets the young princess Medea, who falls in love with him – a development usually explained as an intervention by the goddess Aphrodite. Jason's quest is to overcome the magical obstacles protecting the Golden Fleece, and he promises to marry Medea if she uses her magic to help him.³⁸

In Euripides's tragedy, Medea calls upon Themis and Zeus, the deities protecting oaths, to avenge Jason's perjury.³⁹ In Seneca's version, Medea's prayer of revenge invokes, among others, the »gods of wedlock« and »Lucina, guardian of the nuptial couch.«⁴⁰ Though already a stable ingredient of the Medea story in antiquity, Jason's promise to marry Medea in exchange for her assistance turns into an even more dominant feature in eighteenth-century Medea dramas. Here I suggest that perhaps the most important intertext for the eighteenth-century focus on Jason's betrayal is not a tragedy but, instead, a verse epistle. In

Ovid's version of the story in *Epistulae Heroidum*, Jason's solemn oath to remain faithful to Medea, calling Juno as his witness, is a centerpiece. Medea relates how Jason promises to marry her in the temple of Artemis. In Jason's words, »may my spirit vanish away into thin air before another than thou shall come a bride to my chamber! My witness be Juno, ward of the rites of wedlock, and the goddess in whose marble shrine we stand!« [»spiritus ante meus tenues vanescat in auras / quam thalamo nisi tu nupta sit ulla meo!«].⁴¹

Medea reflects on Jason's sincerity upon taking the oath, and in hindsight she questions him: »I saw even tears – or was there in the tears, too, part of your deceit?« [»vidi etiam lacrimas – an pars est fraudis in illis?«].⁴² Earlier in Ovid's letter, Medea called Jason an outright liar.⁴³ Ovid's Medea clearly resonates in the eighteenth-century adaptations of the story. Jason, as a libertine, is portrayed as insincere, and all three eighteenth-century authors use a version of the word *perjury* in relation to his oath.⁴⁴ Even the genre, the verse epistle in elegiac couplets, would convert easily to dialogue, or, better yet, into a dramatic soliloquy by a loving eighteenth-century woman lamenting her abandonment. Gotter exploits this possibility in his melodrama: his text is dominated by Medea's own reflections on her predicament.⁴⁵ The main point, however, is that in depicting Medea as the betrayed innocent, Ovid offers a version of the story from Medea's point of view, presenting the reader with a distinct voice of a woman in distress.

Clément declares in his preface that he portrays his Médée as unhappy and pitiable, »malheureuse & à plaindre, puisqu'elle est abandonnée« (iii), and his resolve is displayed in Médée's complaint against Jason's insincerity in the first act. In a meeting with Creon, Médée turns back to the events in Colchis and asks how she should have suspected a hero of deception.⁴⁶ She turns to the gods, who have witnessed Jason's perjury, describes his promises, and concludes, »Il jura ... mais enfin, que dirai-je de plus? / Il fit mille sermens, & les a tous rompus« (23). It is obvious that Médée is a victim of a man who has broken his promises to her over and over again. As a young, gullible woman with a tender heart, she is drawn to Jason, and she adds that her heart was without suspicion (»mon cœur sans défiance«) (23). Throughout the tragedy, she continually hopes for a happy reunion with her beloved husband (27, 38).

Jason's oath is thus extracted from its specific religious context in ancient Athens and transformed into an eighteenth-century version of the promise of marriage.⁴⁷ Its breach casts Jason as a libertine and as lacking the eighteenth-century qualities of ideal masculinity – namely, »self-mastery, conscience and individual responsibility.«⁴⁸ At the same time, the principles of libertinism indicate that Jason's interest in his new bride is primarily sexual. The centrality of the oath also reveals the connection between the Medea story and the European infanticide debate of the late eighteenth century.⁴⁹ As Isabel V. Hull writes, the aristocratic seducer played a major role in the many fictional accounts of infanticide in German-speaking areas. The tales included noble villains seducing innocent girls, breaking the promise of marriage and abandoning their pregnant victims, and the young mother's desperate act in response – the infanticide. These literary texts contributed to placing the Medea story in a new cultural context, and brought about specific solutions to the conflict between the passive victim and the active murderess. Hull points out that the new gender hierarchies of the eighteenth century invited the female victim to remain passive even in the role of murderess: »she kills her baby in a fever, without knowing what she is doing.«⁵⁰ It is, in fact, the British text that chooses this solution; as mentioned earlier, Glover's Medea kills her sons in a fit of »phrenzy.« I suggest that the European Medea dramas of the late eighteenth century – not just the German examples – function as visions of an emerging mode of gendered hierarchy, confronting male rapacious sexuality with female subordination and passivity.

Gotter's melodrama, dominated by Medea's soliloquies, leaves little room for the libertine on stage. In the final scene, Jason declares his love for his sons, curses Medea, and falls on his sword, at which point he has fulfilled his role as libertine in the drama. Glover's version imparts a greater degree of importance to the figure of Jason, incorporating his transition into a reformed rake and portraying Medea's deed as an act of insanity.⁵¹ Of the three, it is Clément's Jason who stands out as closer to the Euripidean model in this regard, citing honor and reason as justifications for his actions.⁵² He fears Médée's revenge, and in the final scene he retorts that her punishment is to live. As we know, Clément's Médée chooses death, showing that she cannot bear to live with the consequences of the infanticide. By her suicide, she at least partly redeems herself, and the ending turns the focus back to Jason's treason.

Juno, Marital Fidelity, and Motherhood

A common practice of eighteenth-century authors was to introduce Juno to the Medea drama as a means of emphasizing the importance of marital fidelity and Medea's role as mother and spouse. The Roman goddess Juno, protector of married women and overseer of childbirth, is an important figure in both Glover's and Gotter's versions of the Medea tragedy – her presence is emphasized by staging choices and by specific utterances, such as prayers by the protagonists. Juno's involvement in these works shifts the focus from sexual jealousy – characteristic of the ancient tragedies – to eighteenth-century notions of femininity, in which marital fidelity and motherhood are paramount.⁵³

Medea invokes Juno directly in the first scene of Gotter's melodrama, calling her »des ehelichen Bundes Beschüzerin,« the protector of wedlock, and »des Meineids Rächerin,« the avenger of perjury (6). This sets the focus directly on the central conflict of the drama: Jason has abandoned his wife and betrayed his oath of fidelity. At stake is the importance of motherhood. In the fourth scene of Gotter's version, the nurse explains to Medea's children that they are to pray for their mother in the grove of Juno (12). In Glover's tragedy, the priestess of Juno has similar instructions for the two sons: »You shall lift / Your blameless hands, sweet supplicants, shall kneel / To nuptial Juno, and to rev'rend Themis, / The arbitress of oaths, and plighted faith« (44). In both plays, a female guardian teaches the children to pray for their mother, and the symbolic presence of Juno in both contexts serves to reinforce family ideals of male fidelity and an intimate relationship between mother and children. In Glover's *Medea*, the children's innocence is underscored by comments such as Theano's reference to the »dove-like voice of your untainted age« (44).

Mother and sons meet onstage in Gotter's melodrama, and Medea embraces her children, according to the stage directions, and exclaims, »O der Wonne! ich habe nun nichts gelitten. Ich bin ganz glücklich« (12). A mother embracing her children onstage turns into the epitome of happiness, and in this moment of bliss, »Wonne,« Medea forgets her sufferings. The scene makes clear that to a woman, motherhood is true bliss.⁵⁴ Additional stage directions in the 1788 edition reinforce the importance of the scene to a reading audience, who would not have recourse to the visual aspects of the performance: »(Gruppe mütterlicher Zärtlichkeit; Medea hält den ältern Knaben schwebend in einem Arme; der Jüngere hängt an ihrem Halse; von der knieenden Aufseherinn unterstützt)« (500). This tableau lends visual expression to the unity between Medea, her children, and the nurse, with the physical intimacy between Medea and her children in focus.⁵⁵

In Glover's tragedy, one of the few stage directions instructs Medea to kneel with the children before Jason (63). She is »[i]mploring pity of the man, who scorn'd her.« Jason replies by invoking Juno and confessing to Medea that he has already married Creusa (63). Earlier, the children beg their father to leave them with their »kind mother« (61).

Clément does not include the children as speaking characters in his tragedy, but Médée's monologue after the murder represents her remorse vividly, as well as the physical intimacy of mother and children. She cries out that neither their tender age nor their sorrowful cries, nor even their outstretched arms, could make the dagger fall from her bloodstained hand.⁵⁶ The two sons are even said to kiss her hand as they are stabbed to death.⁵⁷ This monologue paints a vivid image of the death scene, accentuating both the loving innocence of the children and the coexistence of the loving and the avenging mother in Médée. Gotter takes this a step further in his visualization of Medea's predicament. In the fourth and the fifth scenes, Medea is torn between her love for her sons and her planned revenge. The dialogue jumps between expressions of love, threats, and warnings, and the sons' attempts to make sense of their mother's contradictory words and gestures. The stage directions repeatedly have Medea embrace her children on stage and then, briefly thereafter, physically reject them (13–16). At the end of the fifth scene, Medea calls herself »die abscheulichste der Mütter« and predicts that her love will be the death of her sons (16).⁵⁸

The innocence of the children and the references to Juno function as means to accentuate motherhood as a core value of eighteenth-century femininity. Medea's love for her two sons is manifested by bodily intimacy, expressed either in words or by means of gestures and postures on stage. The primary conflict for eighteenth-century Medea is no longer one between a woman and a goddess; tormenting her instead are the agonies of a loving mother and spouse caused by the betrayal of her husband. The presence of the two children enhances the possibilities of extreme emotional change, a prerequisite of eighteenth-century sentimental drama.⁵⁹

Power and Love

In Seneca's *Medea*, the protagonist excels in sorcery on stage and is represented as an evil witch. In Euripides's tragedy, Medea is empowered by her divine descent, and her contributions to the success of the hero Jason are recounted in the introduction. In the eighteenth-century context, Medea's role as a powerful sorceress and demigoddess is played down. Glover, for example, offers the protagonist what appears to be a spectacular display of power when he has her wave a wand and invoke Hecate, her »congenial goddess« (52).⁶⁰ However, the scene turns out to be nothing more than a dialogue with an oracle, focusing very little on Medea's command of the gods of the underworld. If anything, the exchange serves to emphasize Medea's lack of power and her inability to see the future since she misinterprets Hecate's prediction and believes that her fate is to kill Jason (53–54). In sum, while this is a potentially juicy scene for an awe-inspiring actress, it does not turn Glover's Medea into a Senecan witch. More than anything, in fact, it can be used to underscore Medea's tragic fate.

The obvious intertext to Medea's vulnerability is Ovid's *Heroides*, in which the contrast between Medea's magical powers and her lack of power over Jason's heart is utilized as a means to underline her victimization. Ovid expresses this bitter paradox in two lines: »Dragons and maddened bulls, it seems, I could subdue; a man alone I could not« [*serpentis igitur potui taurosque furentes; / unum non potui perdomuisse virum*].⁶¹ Both Gotter and Glover follow suit in their explorations of Medea's dual nature as a mythological figure on the one hand and a loving woman and mother on the other. This contrast underscores Medea's humanity in the context of eighteenth-century gender ideals. The question posed, directly or indirectly, is: What is the point of having superhuman powers for a woman who cannot even secure the love of her husband? The answer these dramas suggest is that domestic love takes priority in a woman's life. According to this view of femininity, Medea's powers count for nothing.

A dialogue between Medea and a Phæacian in Glover's version spells out the conflict:

FIRST PHÆACIAN

[...]

Hast thou not magic to constrain this wand'rer
Back to thy arms?

MEDEA

I have, but scorn the arts,
Which may command his person, not his love. (54–55)

Glover's Medea cannot command passions, and the conclusion is that her power is futile. Jason's love, the love and fidelity of her husband, is all that matters to her.

Medea's reflections on the limits of magical power in the first scene of Gotter's version go in a similar direction: »Useelige Macht! – Die Elemente gehorchen meiner Stimme – und das Herz des Mannes, den ich liebe, verschließt sich ihr! Schatten bring' ich vom Orkus zurück – und ein Herz kann ich nicht erhalten« (7). The antithetical structure that Gotter introduced at the very beginning of his play is applied here as a means for underlining the values of femininity in the late eighteenth century. The same holds for Glover, as shown by the quotation above: to a woman, according to these eighteenth-century authors, love is more important than magical power.

Clément seeks to underscore Medea's human side through staging, by refraining from the use of machinery as well as any other dramaturgical element that might portray Medea as a superhuman character. His aim is to place someone with a heart on stage, and in this respect his Médée is less of a deity than her British and German counterparts. Glover and Gotter go one step further by defusing her divine powers. An eighteenth-century woman's true power is shown by another characteristic: her ability to maintain the sexual interest of her partner. As Hull writes, a wife »was to study men to divine their real needs and orchestrate their desires accordingly.«⁶² On this point, the eighteenth-century Medea fails, according to the gendered principles of marriage.

Medea and Eighteenth-Century Femininity

What are the common traits in these three eighteenth-century depictions of Medea? In this context, it is relevant to look at what Lessing said about Medea: »Einer zärtlichen, eifersüchtigen Frau, will ich noch alles vergeben; sie ist das, was sie sein soll, nur zu heftig.«⁶³ First of all, Medea in her eighteenth-century incarnations turns into an innocent victim of a libertine. Though the daughter of a king, she has much in common with other notable fictional women of the eighteenth century who are usually depicted as socially inferior to male aristocratic perpetrators. As soon as Medea's victimization is emphasized in the eighteenth-century versions, it is generally combined with the rejection of dissimulation. Whereas the audience knows that Euripides's Medea puts on a mask in order to prepare her revenge, most eighteenth-century versions abstain from this kind of delusion. The sentimental code of behavior presupposes complete harmony between passion and expression; authenticity is close to an equivalent of virtue, as Lessing shows in *Miss Sara Sampson*.⁶⁴

This is also a gendered issue since the dissimulation of the male predator is a condition for the seduction of the gullible virgin. Behind this dichotomy between the seducer and the victim of seduction lies a specific view of sexuality. As Hull concludes, »as the expression of active sexual desire came to be considered increasingly a male attribute, it became more and more socially dangerous for women to exhibit it.«⁶⁵ The fictional representations of Medea follow suit – Medea's authenticity, her absence of duplicity, could be read in the eighteenth-century context as a lack of active sexual desire. This reading is supported by the omission of a second sexual partner, king Aegeus of Euripides's tragedy. In contrast, Jason's identity as a

libertine heightens the sexual motivation for his new marriage. As we have seen, the true desire of the eighteenth-century Medea is to be a loving mother, and not the sexually insulted protagonist we find in Euripides and Seneca. The fact that several authors added dialogues between Medea and her children, or described their bodily intimacy, implies a gravitation toward motherhood in the dramas. The children are symbols of innocence and of the centrality of marriage, and their presence enforces the significance of Jason's oath. Medea's infanticide is interpreted as an element of her victimization. It is the consequence of Jason's perjury – an act of insanity in Glover's tragedy, a supposedly altruistic act in Gotter's melodrama, or a desperate and passionate act in Clément's tragedy. Eventually, the eighteenth-century Medea is stripped of her supernatural power, in the sense that she admits that the power to secure the love of a husband is all that matters to an ideal woman. This constitutes her tragic flaw.

The Character and the Actress

While sentimental and domestic ideals demanded that actresses deemphasize the sexual aspects of the Medea figure, the emerging presence of the celebrity actress in the eighteenth century tells a somewhat different story. As Dabhoiwala suggests, sexual celebrity was exploited in the new media, and the lives of courtesans and other public women became the focus of an unprecedented wave of printed debate.⁶⁶ There are many accounts that portray actresses as »public women« (i.e., prostitutes), but recent research has come to focus less on the actresses' sexuality and more on how they constructed their public images and communicated female subjectivity to their audiences.⁶⁷ As Felicity Nussbaum shows, the star actress held a most prominent position in eighteenth-century London, and actresses »were among those who constituted the first female subjects in the public arena.«⁶⁸ Nussbaum's suggestion applies not only to London but, indeed, to a broader, European discussion of eighteenth-century drama and theater. I suggest that, together, the domestication of Medea and the increasing focus on the celebrity actress reflect the tensions within the changing gender system of the eighteenth century. The actress, on the one hand, echoes and displays the supernatural powers of the ancient Medea, while the texts, on the other, restrict the character to a narrowly confined role.

It is ironic that the eighteenth century Medea, so consciously transformed into a »normal« woman – a mother and a spouse –, is simultaneously offered a new kind of divinity, as a celebrity actress, raised above the confines of everyday life. Some of the more troubling aspects of the ancient Medea, painstakingly subdued by eighteenth-century authors, seem to re-appear in the shape of the star actress, one of the few examples of women uniting rhetorical skills, public performance, sexual emancipation, economic success, and perhaps more implicitly, political agency. This tension creates moments of »transition,« in Nussbaum's words, engaging actors and audience in a tacit negotiation of theatrical illusion and blurring the line between actress and character.⁶⁹ Nussbaum's double view, her awareness of the negotiations between the representation of a character in a specific drama and the possibilities of representation inherent in the actress's persona, suggests a more nuanced understanding of eighteenth-century sexuality than the argument developed by Dabhoiwala does. Nussbaum's perspective sheds new light on both Marwood and Sara, the former character coinciding more with the ancient Medea and the persona of the star actress, and the latter with the eighteenth-century versions of the domestic Medea and ideal eighteenth-century femininity. And, as we know, it would be possible for a single woman to represent these seemingly contradictory versions of femininity.

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² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Miss Sara Sampson*, in: *Werke und Briefe in 12 Bänden*, edited by Wilfried Barner with Klaus Bohnen a.o., Frankfurt/M 1985–2003, vol. 3, pp. 431–526; here p. 464; hereafter referred to as *WB*. Ann Schmiesing, *Remembering and Forgetting in *Miß Sara Sampson**, in: *Lessing Yearbook/Jahrbuch* 27, 1995, pp. 19–37; here p. 30.

³ On Lessing's sources from Euripides and Seneca to French and English »Rührstücke«, see Lessing, *WB* 3: 1209–1218; Wilfried Barner, *Eine neue Medea*, in: *Produktive Rezeption. Lessing und die Tragödien Senecas*. München 1973, pp. 35–52.

⁴ See for example Erika Fischer-Lichte, *History of European Drama and Theatre*, trans. by Jo Riley, London and New York 2002, pp. 146–201.

⁵ Jane Davidson Reid, *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts, 1300-1990s*, New York/Oxford 1993, vol. 2, pp. 645–646, accounts for about fifty representations of Medea during the eighteenth century, including ballet, visual art, opera, and tragedy. On Medea and her reception, see: *Medea: Essays on Medea in Myth, Literature, Philosophy, and Art*, edited by James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston, Princeton 1997; *Medea in Performance 1500-2000*, edited by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Oliver Taplin, Oxford 2000; Matthias Luserke-Jaqui, *Medea. Studien zur Kulturgeschichte der Literatur*, Tübingen and Basel 2002; Josephine McDonagh, *Child Murder and British Culture 1720-1900*, Cambridge 2003; Britta Schmierer, *Motivation in Medeatragödien der Antike und der Neuzeit*, Würzburg 2005; Inge Stephan, *Medea. Multimediale Karriere einer mythologischen Figur*, Köln, Weimar, etc. 2006; Amy Wygant, *Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France: Stages and Histories, 1553–1797*, Aldershot, 2007; *Unbinding Medea: Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Classical Myth from Antiquity to the 21st Century*, edited by Heike Bartel and Anne Simon, Leeds 2010; *medeamorphosen. Mythos und ästhetische Transformation*, edited by Nike Bätzner, Matthias Dreyer a.o., München 2010; *Looking at Medea: Essays and a Translation of Euripides' Tragedy*, edited by David Stuttard, London 2014; Katherine Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea: Medea in English Literature, 1558–1688*, Basingstoke 2015.

⁶ Faramerz Dabhoiwala, *The Origins of Sex: A History of the First Sexual Revolution*, Oxford 2012. See also *Women, Gender and Enlightenment*, edited by Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, Basingstoke 2005. On »gender roles in theory and in practice«, see Robert B. Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society, 1650-1850: The Emergence of Separate Spheres?*, London and New York 1998, p. 58, and Isabel V. Hull, *Sexuality, State, and Civil Society in Germany, 1700-1815*, Ithaca and London 1996.

⁷ On Marwood both as a champion for women's solidarity and the irascible revenger, see Lessing *WB* 3: 1216–1217. See also Inge Stephan, »So ist die Tugend ein Gespenst.« *Frauenbild und Tugendbegriff im bürgerlichen Trauerspiel bei Lessing und Schiller*, in: *Lessing Yearbook/Jahrbuch* 17, 1985, pp. 1–20; here pp. 4–5. Stephan argues that a »Paradigmenwechsel« takes place in the drama, from the notion of an autonomous woman, sexually active, to the notion of a passive, sentimental woman.

⁸ Edith Hall, *Medea on the Eighteenth-Century London Stage*, in: Hall, Macintosh, and Taplin (endnote 5), pp. 49–74; here p. 50; Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy as She-Tragedy*, in: *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660–1914*, Oxford 2005, pp. 64–98; here p. 97, with the expression »extensive plastic surgery.« On the unpredictable use of classical examples, see Heavey, *Early Modern Medea* (endnote 5), p. 19.

⁹ Cf. Hall, *Medea on the London stage* (endnote 8), p. 69.

¹⁰ On the criticism of Medea's monstrosity, see Hall and Macintosh (endnote 8), p. 92; Jörg Krämer, *Die Problematik des Medea-Stoffs im mittleren 18. Jahrhundert*, in: *Deutschsprachiges Musiktheater im späten 18. Jahrhundert. Typologie, Dramaturgie und Anthropologie einer populären Gattung*, Tübingen 1998, vol. 1, pp. 306–308; Wygant, *Medea, Magic, and Modernity* (endnote 5), pp. 171–172.

¹¹ On Glover's Medea, see Hall, *Medea on the London Stage* (endnote 8), pp. 49-74. See also Edith Hall, *Medea and British Legislation before the First World War*, in: *Greece & Rome*, vol. 46, No. 1 (Apr., 1999), pp. 42-77. Karen Heavey, »We Poor Helpless Women«: *Humanising Medea, 1648–1761*, in: *Kaleidoscope: The Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Journal of Durham University's Institute of Advanced Study*, vol. 3, No. 1 (2009), <http://community.dur.ac.uk/kaleidoscope/index.php/kaleidoscope/article/view/41> [accessed January 7, 2017]; Heavey, *Early Modern Medea* (endnote 5), pp. 200-201. On the performances, see *The London Stage, 1660–1800: A Calendar of Plays, Entertainments & Afterpieces, Together with Casts, Box-Receipts and Contemporary Comment*, part IV, 1747–1776, ed. George Winchester Stone, jr., Carbondale, Ill., 1962, vol. 2-3, part V, ed. Charles Beecher Hogan, Carbondale, Ill., 1968, vol. 1-2, recording nine performances between 1767 and 1792, eight with Mrs. Yates, and the last with Mrs. Pope as Medea.

¹² Richard Glover, *Medea. A Tragedy*, London, 1761. I have also consulted *Medea*, in: *British Theatre*, ed. John Bell, London, 1792.

¹³ On Gotter's *Medea*, see Yixu Lü, *Medea unter den Deutschen. Wandlungen einer literarischen Figur*, Freiburg im Breisgau 2009; Yixu Lü, *Transformations of Medea on the Eighteenth-Century German Stage*, in: Bartel and Simon (endnote 5), pp. 148–160; Marcus Gammel, »Weib was für eine Stimme.« *Medea als Melodram bei Pascal Dusapin und Jiri Antonin Benda*, in: Bätzner, Dreyer (endnote 5), pp. 63–72. The performances are listed in Krämer (endnote 10), vol. 2, p. 862. See also Stephan, *Medea* (endnote 5), p. 197; Luserke-Jaqui (endnote 5), pp. 119–122.

¹⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter, *Medea. Ein mit Musik vermischtes Drama*, Gotha 1775; *Medea. Melodrama*, in: *Gedichte von Friedrich Wilhelm Gotter*, vol. 2, Gotha 1788, pp. 485–518. On the editions, translations, and editions of the music by Georg Benda, see Wolfgang Schimpf, *Lyrisches Theater. Das Melodrama des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen 1988, pp. 219–223. See also Jörg Krämer, *Aporien der Empfindsamkeit. Das Melodram als Modegattung*, in Krämer (endnote 10), vol. 1, pp. 293–353, also Krämer, vol. 2, pp. 862–863. On melodrama: Ulrike Küster, *Das Melodrama. Zum ästhetikgeschichtlichen Zusammenhang von Dichtung und Musik im 18. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, etc. 1994.

¹⁵ Jean-Marie-Bernard Clément, *Médée, Tragédie en trois actes*, Paris 1779. On Clément, see Wygant, *Medea, Magic, and Modernity* (endnote 5), pp. 163–174; Amy Wygant, *Revolutionary Medea*, in: Bartel and Simon (endnote 5), pp. 136–147; Zoé Schweitzer, *Sexualité et questions de genre dans les Médée renaissantes et classiques*, in: *Revue Silène. Centre de recherches en littérature et poétique comparées de Paris Ouest-Nanterre-La Défense*, URL: http://www.revue-silene.com/index.php?sp=liv&livre_id=89, ISSN 2105-2816, pp. 1–13 [accessed January 4, 2017]. On performance: A. Joannidès, *La Comédie-Française de 1680 à 1900. Dictionnaire général des pièces et des auteurs*, Paris 1901, p. 57 and Table chronologique des pièces.

¹⁶ Gotter, 1775 (endnote 14), p. [5]. Gotter spells the Greek names »Kreusa« and »Kreon.« I use the English spelling when referring to Gotter's text.

¹⁷ Euripides, *Medea*, in: *Cyclops, Alcestis, Medea*, ed. and trans. by David Kovacs, Cambridge MA, and London 1994, pp. 293–427; here pp. 416–427. See also Seneca, *Medea*, in: *Seneca's Tragedies*, trans. by Frank Justus Miller, London and Cambridge, Mass. 1960, pp. 225–315; here p. 315.

¹⁸ On the complexity of *Medea's* metaphysics and her human and superhuman aspects, see Edith Hall, *Divine and Human in Euripides' Medea*, in: Stuttard (endnote 5), pp. 139–155; here p. 145, and Hanna M. Roisman, *Medea's Vengeance*, in: Stuttard (endnote 5), pp. 111–122; here pp. 119–120.

¹⁹ *Medea's* »stepping down« is also noted by Lü, *Transformations* (endnote 13), p. 152.

²⁰ Cf. Lü, *Transformations* (endnote 13), pp. 151–152.

²¹ Lü, *Transformations* (endnote 13), p. 152.

²² Cf. Hall, *Divine* (endnote 18), p. 148, on nineteenth-century »altruistic motivation« of *Medea's* infanticide.

²³ On this point I disagree with Lü, who claims that *Medea's* emotional struggle suggests that she retains the divine aspects of Euripides's *Medea*. The supernatural is, in my view, regarded as futile in Gotter's melodrama. Cf. Lü, *Transformations* (endnote 13), p. 152–154.

²⁴ On the dragon chariot and *Medea's* womanhood, see Wygant, *Medea, Magic, and Modernity* (endnote 5), p. 172; Wygant, *Revolutionary Medea* (endnote 15) p. 138.

²⁵ Glover, 1761 (endnote 12), p. 97. In the 1792 version, a final speech by *Medea* is added and the chariot is not just observed in the background of the stage. Glover, 1792, p. 78.

²⁶ I refer here to a general tendency – some aspects of *Medea's* divinity are indeed retained, such as the superior knowledge of Glover's *Medea*. Cf. Hall, *Divine* (endnote 18).

²⁷ Hall, *Medea on the London Stage* (endnote 8), p. 55.

²⁸ On the transformation of the Aigeus scene in *Miss Sara Sampson*, see Schmierer (endnote 5), pp. 100–102.

²⁹ Hall, *Medea and British Legislation* (endnote 11), p. 49.

³⁰ Matthew McCormack, *The Independent Man: Citizenship and Gender Politics in Georgian England*, Manchester and New York [2005] 2011.

³¹ Gotter, 1775 (endnote 14), p. 23: »Sie [=die Götter] hören den Meineidigen nicht.«

³² In *Miss Sara Sampson*, the discussion about »Verstellung« is crucial – it is associated with the aristocratic libertine but also with Marwood, the *Medea* figure. Sara, however, has not learned the art of dissimulation – her authenticity is a vital part of her role as the virtuous innocent. Lessing, *WB* 3: 439, 458, 460, 468, 491, 496.

³³ Schweitzer (endnote 15), p. 11.

³⁴ Dabhoiwala (endnote 6), p. 174.

³⁵ Dabhoiwala (endnote 6), p. 176.

³⁶ Dabhoiwala (endnote 6), p. 162. Cf. Hall, *Medea on the London Stage* (endnote 8), p. 67.

³⁷ Simonetta Sanna, *Von Miss Sara Sampson zu Emilia Galotti. Die Formen des Medea-Mythos im Lessingschen Theater*, in: *Lessing Yearbook/Jahrbuch* 24, 1992, pp. 45–76; here p. 48.

- ³⁸ On the mythical background to Euripides' tragedy and the Argonautica story, see Fritz Graf, *Medea, the Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well-Known Myth*, in: James J. Clauss and Sarah Iles Johnston (endnote 5), 21–43.
- ³⁹ On Zeus and Themis and the centrality of Jason's perjury, see David Kovacs, Introduction, in: Euripides (endnote 17), p. 289; also Hall, *Divine* (endnote 18), p. 141–142; Ruth Scodel, *Medea*, in: *An Introduction to Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 120–132; here p. 122.
- ⁴⁰ Seneca (endnote 17), p. 229. See also Hall, *Divine* (endnote 18), p. 147–148, referring to Juno Lucina.
- ⁴¹ Ovid, XII. *Medea to Jason*, in: *Heroides and Amores*, trans. by Grant Showerman, Cambridge MA [1914] 1963, I, 85–88, 148–149.
- ⁴² Ovid (endnote 41), l. 91, pp. 148–149.
- ⁴³ Ovid (endnote 41), l. 11–12, p. 143: »Why did I too greatly delight in those golden locks of yours, in your comely ways, and in the false graces of your tongue?«
- ⁴⁴ Glover, 1761 (endnote 12), p. 33: »Thy perjurd heart«; Gotter, 1775 (endnote 14), p. 6, 23: »den Meineidigen«; Clément (endnote 15), p. 23: »parjure«.
- ⁴⁵ Cf. Lü, *Transformations* (endnote 13), p. 152–153.
- ⁴⁶ Clément (endnote 15), p. 23: »Hé! comment soupçonner un Héros d'imposture?«
- ⁴⁷ Hall, *Divine* (endnote 18), *passim*.
- ⁴⁸ McCormack (endnote 30), p. 2. McCormack refers to England, but similar views are found in Germany. See Hull (endnote 6), especially *The Male Sexual Model, and Women's Place in the Male Sexual Model*, pp. 245–256.
- ⁴⁹ Hull (endnote 6), *Infanticide*, pp. 280–285, with references to Jan Matthias Rameckers, *Der Kindesmord in der Literatur der Sturm-und-Drang-Periode. Ein Beitrag zur Kultur- und Literaturgeschichte des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Amsterdam 1927; Hall, *Medea and British Legislation* (endnote 11), p. 49–50; Hall and Macintosh (endnote 8), pp. 92–97; Luserke-Jaqui (endnote 5), p. 122, part II, with extensive documents about child murder; McDonagh (endnote 5).
- ⁵⁰ Hull (endnote 6), p. 285.
- ⁵¹ On the reformed rake as the best husband, see Dabhoiwala (endnote 6), p. 185.
- ⁵² Clément (endnote 15), pp. 28–30.
- ⁵³ Cf. Hall, *Medea on the London Stage* (endnote 8), .
- ⁵⁴ Cf. Shoemaker (endnote 6), p. 63.
- ⁵⁵ On melodrama and tableaux, see Kirsten Gram Holmström, *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on some Trends of Theatrical Fashion 1770–1815*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis, Stockholm Studies in Theatrical History 1, Stockholm 1967.
- ⁵⁶ Clément (endnote 15), p. 46: »Ni votre âge innocent, ni vos cris douloureux, / Ni ces bras caressans tendus à votre mere, / N'ont fait tomber le fer de ma main sanguinaire.«
- ⁵⁷ Clément (endnote 15), p. 46: »En baisant cette main, vous mouriez sous mes coups.«
- ⁵⁸ Cf. Luserke-Jaqui (endnote 5), p. 122.
- ⁵⁹ Hall, *Medea on the London Stage* (endnote 8), p. 60.
- ⁶⁰ Hall, *Medea and British Legislation* (endnote 11), p. 49.
- ⁶¹ Ovid (endnote 41), l. 163–164, p. 154–155.
- ⁶² Hull (endnote 6), p. 291.
- ⁶³ Lessing, *Hamburgische Dramaturgie*, 30. Stück, in: *Lessing WB 6: 331*. Cf. Barner (endnote 3), p. 50.
- ⁶⁴ On transparency, see Dror Wahrman, *Sex and Sensibility: Introduction*, in Knott and Taylor (endnote 6), pp. 136–139.
- ⁶⁵ Hull (endnote 6), p. 253.
- ⁶⁶ Dabhoiwala (endnote 6), p. 321; *Sexual Celebrity*, pp. 296–313.
- ⁶⁷ Kimberly Crouch, *The Public Life of Actresses: Prostitutes or Ladies?*, in: *Gender in Eighteenth-Century England: Roles, Representations and Responsibilities*, edited by Hannah Barker and Elaine Chalus, London and New York 1997, pp. 58–78.
- ⁶⁸ Felicity Nussbaum, *Rival Queens: Actresses, Performance, and the Eighteenth-Century British Theater*, Philadelphia 2010, p. 17.
- ⁶⁹ Nussbaum (endnote 68), p. 21. Nussbaum refers to epilogues, spoken »at stage's edge,« but I suggest that her observation is valid also in a broader context of interplay between the actress's persona and the character. See also Stephan, *Medea* (endnote 5), pp. 182–184.