

Call for papers

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Medea

the laceration of Care

The journal "K." has acknowledged the question of the tragic and its nuances as a crucial stage in the logic of the destituent power since its very first issue in 2008. By identifying in the figure of Antigone and in her extraordinary fibrillation within Western culture (and not only) the possibility of provoking a reflection on the destiny of power in modern politics, we believed we could find in Oedipus' daughter the archetype of any radical indocility able, with her withdrawal, to unleash the irreparable of politics, to stimulate its event. Three years later – perhaps with a somewhat naive and rigid gesture, still useful for glimpsing and allowing other essential traits of the destitution of being and identity to explode – it seemed almost unavoidable to mirror this archetype of the tragic feminine with a figure that is perhaps even more excruciating, capable of perpetrating the unspeakable: Medea.

Antigone is the one who, with extraordinary stubbornness and tenacity, safeguards family relationships against the instance of power. She embodies the difference of politics in the *nomos* of power. Sophocles' Antigone is ready to do anything to take care of the corpse of a family member, but only if it is her brother's, i.e. an ideally innocent relationship (a limit that had already shocked Goethe and would find a tragic denial in Georg Trakl). His defiance of the city's laws, therefore, has localised boundaries marked by circumscribed passions. Her name, *anti-genos*, which should put a stop to the slaughtering logic that characterises her family, makes her the most faithful priestess of its value in spite of everything.

From this perspective, Medea is the contrary of or, perhaps, even Antigone's "other", because she acts outside all rules. While Antigone takes care of her dead brother's body, Medea kills her brother. If in Antigone a dialectic tension typical of the Greek world (between *nomos* and *oikos*) is consummated, Medea, probably as a foreigner, escapes from every dialectic and constantly betrays her family (following Jean Anouilh's invention in his 1946 *Medea*, she was already seeing other men during her friendship with Jason). Moreover, the first is a Greek woman, the second comes from another world. As an example, Medea inaugurates her favourite activity - destroying family ties - by killing her brother Absyrtus and, even if she is overwhelmed by her passion for Jason, one aspect should not be underestimated: Jason is also the one who can help her leave her father's house.

Medea is mother, sister, murderess, subversive figure, lucid and passionate queen of Colchis, exiled, lover, infanticide, vagrant, foreigner, wife, unpunished (in fact, there are no 'penal' consequences for her criminal actions). She is a powerful and extreme woman, capable of devastating the tyranny of Corinth. Her passions transcend all inclinations of human finiteness. As the granddaughter of Helios, Medea is of divine parentage and she appears indifferent to the blows of fate. She possesses almost magical arts and knows the human soul, especially its frailties.

That is why it seems to us that Medea, woman and barbarian, is a name capable of materialising the terror of every male (not only Greek): she neglects the orders of her father and husband; she kills her brother

and sons; she relentlessly challenges male authority, tenaciously deserting the role of the victim. At the same time, Medea explores the threshold from which every woman feels distant. Yet, who knows, her solitude evokes a less rare psychological and emotional condition than is acceptable.

Was Schiller right to glimpse a sublime trait in Medea's gesture? Sublime in the technical Kantian sense: that element forcing us to think because it reveals itself to be unheard of, placed beyond what is humanly comprehensible and yet viscerally human in its inhumanity.

Needless to say, the myth of Medea is vast, multiple, with countless variations, irreducible to a unity. In a millenary trajectory that cultivates and provokes infinite re-writings of its history, it crosses the primordial story of the Golden Fleece and the Greeks' vision of the stranger. There is the myth of Medea, and then the Greek, Roman and German history of this myth; we know a Neapolitan, African, Yugoslavian, proletarian and anti-racist, romantic and expressionist version, and many others. Each of these variants allows further declinations and inventions to flourish (on this see M. Bettini and G. Pucci, *Il Mito di Medea*, Einaudi, 2017). Medea goes to the theatre, to the cinema, to the opera. She has been painted, sculpted and analysed. However, she remains the black hole of every vision because she deprives any form of reason.

It is well known that only with Euripides does the sore point of the mythical story takes its most famous and terrible turn: Medea's murder of her sons Mermeros and Phereas. A shocking and unequivocal gesture, but one which, as a matter of fact, preserves and releases a myriad of contradictory tensions that among the ancient authors, perhaps only Euripides is able to manage without nailing the figure of Medea exclusively to the dimension of the frightening. On the contrary, Seneca's *Medea* appears as a blinded woman incapable of handing back a torn and multiple souls.

If, on the one hand, from the very first lines of Euripides' tragedy, the love for the children is strongly doubted by the Chorus (the inhabitants of Corinth), Medea, finally, seems to kill them because she lets the most frightening logic of the symbolic order of the mother emerge: care as an extreme form of possession (more than anyone else in 1949 Corrado Alvaro puts his hand on infanticide as a system of protection in the extraordinary *The Long Night of Medea*). She kills them because, she says, in this way no one will be able to take her away from her children. Unwittingly sent by their mother to assassinate their father's betrothed Glauce (King Creon's daughter), they would certainly be punished with death. Thus, the mother should directly deal with the crime. But perhaps things are not so simple: Medea probably acts because she does not tolerate that her children are their father's exclusive property!

In Euripides' tragedies, it is impossible for the foreigner, be he a barbarian or an out-of-the-ordinary Greek, to sustain his (non)identity: the values of the *polis* are the only ones admissible; there is no room for anything else. In Euripides' *Medea*, Jason, the champion of political realism, reminds Medea, who is enraged by the hypocrisy of her children's father and bitter at what she once devised for the benefit of this man who lacks courage and is now prepared to abandon her, of what he has given her: the civilisation deriving from the law

Jason: First of all, you now live among the Greeks, not in a country of barbarians.

You're familiar with justice and the laws, rather than brute force. Besides, all the Greeks know you're clever, so you have earned yourself a fine reputation. If you still lived out there at the boundary of the world, no one would talk about you. (vv. 536-541 transl. by Ian Johnston 2008)

If 5th century Greece perceives itself as the homeland of law, since it does not evoke the violence of blood to impose justice, Jason's betrayal of the *oikos* to gain access to the city's sphere of economic and political power reveals instead the icy and ruthless character of the *nomos*. The political virtue of Greece turns out to be an empty shell; while the character of Medea takes on the grandiose features of the bloodthirsty demon, or rather of a figure who is essentially unmanageable by the order of the law. She is banished from Corinth: she is *atimos*; dishonoured, expelled from the city with the application of the limiting figure

of Greek law (in Euripides' *Medea* everything precipitates towards the greatest disaster when the woman knows she is condemned to exile; this destiny breaks the history of a family in two).

Medea frees herself from the extreme grip of the law, from the condition of being included in the absolute marginalisation; she cannot stand Jason's pity who, in his cloy way, wants to facilitate her exile with trivial offers. Rather, she takes care to no longer care about anything, even what she loves the most. She annihilates the *oikos*, the evocation of the other within the polis, doubly represented by her as woman and foreigner, to evoke its power: she decrees its irreducible dimension to the political *logos*. But to do so, she devastates it.

In other words, Medea tears what politics excludes to impose, in its absence, its deafening presence. She defends, even to the point of eliminating them, her children from the terrible existence of the excluded, of the stateless and, when the king of Corinth grants them, unlike their mother, a destiny different from that of exile, that is, of foreigners in their homeland, her determination remains unperturbed.

Medea is, therefore, a very intelligent woman and thinks very well but she thinks *differently*: she tears apart all custom and economy of utility and lets her desire resist even when the object of desire becomes detestable. The pure exposition of her own life without any guarantee as a decision of the political, is the atrocious infamy to which Medea rebels to; her extreme gesture materialises the impossible exclusion by the polis of the unknown, of the other, without provoking an excess of that intestine violence capable of revoking its force. Medea strikes the body of her children to write with the blood of innocence, with the death of the beings she loves the most, her extraneousness to Jason's political *logos*.

Medea rises up against the decision that seals the time of unhappiness, that is, as Sophocles' *Electra* does, she does not allow herself to be crushed by the *zoe*, by the social reality of woman, she does not identify herself quietly with her political misfortune. To find a remedy for the injustice from a position of exclusion, an unjust power causes injustice: Medea annihilates the power and excludes herself because she understands that there is no other destiny for her but to become a supplicating vagrant.

Medea does not allow herself to be assimilated, not even as a prisoner! She refuses to do what they ask of her; she refuses to become the woman men want her to be. As a nomad, she inhabits a condition of permanent leave and throws herself with all her might against an image of woman as guardian of the *oikos* and committed to maternal care. In our eyes, Medea simultaneously incorporates and lacerates the spider woman of the gigantic installations of the Parisian artist Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), who invariably and inevitably saw her mother in her beasts: infinite and invisible threads capable of protecting, capturing and suffocating.

To consecrate an extensive research work to the figure of Medea would therefore mean first of all to come to terms with the culture of Care that, on a closer inspection, constitutes one of the most penetrating and ambiguous devices of contemporary control and is outlined as a cultural inclination able to de-power - with the series of instances related to it: empathy, protection, surveillance, etc. - the subversive charge of the feminine; or, more precisely, as Gilles Deleuze taught us, of becoming anyone's woman as a gesture of permanent misdirection towards those who take care of throttling our escape routes and our minority instances.

In the issue that K. will devote to the figure of Medea, the lines of research may focus around these topics:

- The myth of Medea as an archetypal model of the incarnation of a feminine irreducible to the grammar of the hearth and home, as a model able to decipher the risks of a culture of care as a subtle exemplar and model of control.

- Medea as a symptom: is she an extreme laceration of the symbolic order of the mother (Luisa Muraro) or its extreme fulfilment? Is it possible to escape from this canonical and rigid dialectic? Isn't Medea the radical laceration of any feminine function?

- Medea, the migrant (the foreigner): the aporias of the juridical in the face of those who inhabit the outside. Could Medea point to the need to overcome the logic of citizenship? Isn't citizenship today the most refined device for exclusion policies, even more than juridical, psychological ones?

- Political Medea and the arts: cinema, literature, theatre, sculpture, over the centuries - there are hundreds of both famous and obscure names to mention. They are probably the most appropriate territories for revealing the destituent charge of her tragic experience, which is capable of defusing the decisions of power and destroying the validity of any material and symbolic symmetry between anyone's social and natural role.

-Proposals must be submitted by **20 October 2021** (2,500 characters max.).

Send to: krevuecontact@gmail.com

If the proposal is accepted, the paper must be delivered by **15 April 2022**. After this date, the selected contribution will be automatically excluded from the issue of the journal.