MEDEA AMONG US

The creation of something new, said Eliot, alters everything that has gone before it.

Martha Cooley, *The Archivist*

Euripides (or, as some say, Neophron) altered forever the story of Medea. New stories have changed how we see the Euripidean Medea. But it still lasts. It still has its truth. Christa Wolf’s innocent Medea, a preternaturally good woman, wrongly accused, has much to say, but her story will not undo what is now believed of the child-murderess. She even acknowledges that truth.

That’s the way it is. That’s what it has come to. They’re at pains to assure that even posterity will call me a child-murderess.¹

Did Susan Smith who drowned her children inside her car create something new? And does her story change what we know of Medea? Did a woman—anonymous to me—who, like Ino (though from a slightly changed venue) in the chorus’ parallel, jumped off a parking garage with her two children? Or the widow in Uniontown, Washington who drowned her six children in a well on the twenty-fifth of February, 1901?² Does the Holocaust change how we see Medea’s story or massacres and enslavements of children (Thucydides 7.29–30; 5.3, 5.32, and 5.85 ff) during the Peloponnesian War³ or the taking of children to be soldiers or sex slaves in the modern world? Does the threat of nuclear holocaust or fears of the Millennium, always coming for some group or another? There is no doubt in my mind that the story of Andrea Pia Yates changes how we see Medea. For the first time in filicide cases I remember, there was nearly universal sympathy (combined

² For this story I would like to thank Edwin P. Garretson, Jr., Professor of History at Washington State University and Archivist for the Whitman County Historical Society. The children’s tragic end is marked by a stele in the Catholic cemetery in Uniontown. A piece about this event is scheduled to appear in the *Bunchgrass Historian*, vol. 32.3, early in 2007.
³ On this see Menu (1992: 252) with references to Thucydides.
with the horror of it all) for the woman convicted of drowning her five children on the twenty-first of June 2001. And with a prosecution witness testifying about the possibility of the accused having seen an episode of *Law and Order* (a popular American television series) in which a mother killed her children and got away with it by pleading insanity, an episode that was never aired, we see in the Yates story the blurring of fictional drama and real life.

Why is Medea’s story remembered for two and a half millennia and shocking but familiar to people all over the world? Are there ever reasons that would justify the killing of one’s children? Belief that they are possessed by evil spirits or would grow up to be monsters? To save them from devils, disease, disgrace, or disaster, from political persecution or other tragedies of life? Fear of the end times? Hopes or expectations of immortality? In one version of the story Medea killed her children by accident while trying to make them immortal. In our version Medea kills them as “an exemplary gesture” to force Jason to see what it means to be human and to live as a human being, but the other motivations are not excluded. They are Jason’s children and would grow up to be his allies and men like their father. She also kills them to prevent their falling into enemies’ hands, as happened in some other versions of the story. And possibly she kills them because she wants them dead, because she and they have more value if they are dead. Because then she is somebody in particular.

My little children have to die, Jason so that your shameful laws can be shattered into pieces! Give me a weapon, women... put it into my hands. And desperate Medea drive, drive the knife into the tender flesh of these children... the blood... the sweet blood! Forget, my heart, that these are the children of this flesh... the blood!... and don’t falter when they cry out: Mother, have pity! Have pity, Mother! And outside the city gates all the people will shout: Monster! Bitch! Murderess! Unnatural mother! Whore! (Softly) And I will weep and say to myself: Die... die and let a new woman be born. (Shouting) A new woman! A new woman! (Dario Fo, *Medea*)

In another modern *Medea*, the heroine achieves an even more chaotic life story than in Euripides’ version, when her creator combines various ancient horror stories with modern acts of political and medical violence, showing that in this myth, a happy ending is nonsense.