

Medea in the Courtroom and on the Stage in Nineteenth-Century London

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In 430 BC the Greek playwright Euripides transformed the mythological figure of Medea into the proto-typical murdering mother when he put a dagger in her hand and had her slaughter her two young sons. Euripides, at the same time, created the only known ancient version of the classic legend to portray Medea sympathetically. It is this combination of sympathy, power and repulsion that has seen Euripides' *Medea*ⁱ endure down through the ages. In nineteenth-century London, when unprecedented numbers of English mothers were killing their babies and it was claimed that London harboured alone 16,000 women who had destroyed their children (Behlmer 23), adaptations of Euripides' play struck a chord with audiences and Medea became the most ubiquitous heroine of the London stage. In the years leading up to and after the introduction of the 1834 Poor Law, infanticide became firmly entrenched on the national political and news agendas. And while Medea on the London stage was the object of public gaze, so too were the real-life Medeas of London, who were charged with infanticide and stood in the dock of the Old Bailey or in a room set aside for inquests at a public inn. This paper examines the intersections between the imagined Medea of the nineteenth-century London stage and real-life Medeas of the London streets by analysing editorial texts in London's most influential nineteenth-century newspaper, the *London Times*. I will draw upon news reports of infanticide trials and inquests, editorials and letters to the editor, and on theatre reviews and news stories about theatre performances and performers across the nineteenth century to map both the nineteenth-century stage persona of Medea and the experience of young abandoned mothers driven to murder their children.

The story of Medea as told by Euripides is briefly this: Medea falls in love with the warrior Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, who arrives in Colchis seeking the Golden Fleece. It is through her magical powers that Jason is able to seize the Golden Fleece. The lovers then sail away to Greece where they are married and Medea gives birth to their two sons. Then, in a bid to secure political power, Jason rejects Medea to marry Creusa, the daughter of the King of Corinth. He assures Medea that his motive is to have a royal offspring, and thus secure the future of *their* children. Medea dismisses his rhetoric and, enraged that the man for whom she has betrayed her family and killed her own brother (amongst others) has rejected her, she chooses to fight for her own and her children's future. She knows that Jason's betrayal will leave her children's future in jeopardy and so in despairing, vengeful rage she kills her rival Creusa and then her children and escapes to Athens with their corpses in chariot drawn by fire-breathing dragons. Medea flies up, over and away from the threshold of any human consequences for her actions. She is a woman triumphant, a woman who, by taking drastic action, has refused to submit to the natural order of things and in so doing becomes what is to male patriarchy the most dangerous of all women, one who has the ability to subvert male power *and* to escape the consequences.

Medea has remained one of the most powerful female characters on stage for more than two millennia because she elicits both sympathy and fear from audiences. While “no more terrible figure has come down in classical legend than Medea, the murderess of her own children” (Mead 18), her intolerable position elicits sympathy and understanding. It is also the complexities of her character that captivate audiences. Medea is a clever woman who finds that her intelligence elicits envy and fear, and she is defiant, refusing to “put up with the treatment she is getting” (lines 38-39). She is also a warrior—it was she who killed the snake that protected the Golden Fleece to give Jason “the safety of the light” (line 410). She is proud and vengeful and is to be feared, admitting that women when wronged “are of every evil the cleverest of contrivers” (line 409). She is a powerful sorceress, whose magic can destroy kingdoms, killing Pelias “with a most dreadful death” (line 487). She betrayed her father and her home for her love of Jason and became an outsider, a barbarian princess who “dwells beyond the boundaries of civilisation” (Stimpson 47). She is a woman whose eloquence, whether in long speeches or in swift argumentative dialogue, commands attention. Above all she is a mother who loves her children and is torn by fear lest they “wander as beggars” (line 515), promising that she will not leave them in a country that hates her, “to feel their enemies’ insults” (line 782). She is a vengeful, infanticidal mother: “For those children he had from me he will never/See alive again” (lines 803-4). Finally she is a woman empowered to act against those who committed wrongs against her:

Let no one think me a weak one, feeble-spirited,
 A stay-at-home, but rather just the opposite,
 One who can hurt my enemies and help my friends;
 For the lives of such persons are most remembered. (lines 807-810)

Through the choric odes Euripides allows her conflict between maternal love, political ambition, and the fury of revenge to be intertwined in what one 1909 theatre critic called “the philosophical interest of what may, in modern language, be called the play’s feminist side” (Anon. “Terry’s Theatre” *Times* Nov. 30, 1909: 12).

Young women brought before the courts on infanticide charges were, in their own way, performers like the actors on the London stage. They were players within the judicial theatre and nineteenth-century infanticide news reports reflected the performative nature of the courtroom. Court reports created an oppositional way of viewing the ‘players’ in infanticide courtroom dramas that placed the young transgressive female up against a body of male authoritarian figures. In the *Times* report of Mary Chapman’s trial at the Old Bailey in 1829 the journalist noted that she was “much affected by the presence of her baby,” who had recovered from attempted strangulation and abandonment in a wheat field. The sight of the infant caused Mary such distress that at one stage she “fell senseless in the dock and was obliged to be removed into the open air in the arms of one of the matrons of the prison, and two of the turnkeys,” and after a delay of about five minutes she was again led into court and the examination resumed. Her child was eventually removed at the suggestion of one of the jury. After a brief adjournment the jury found Mary guilty of attempted murder (“Old Bailey” *Times* June 16, 1829: 4). Three weeks later the *Times* reported the dramatic conclusion to this judicial drama:

At a very early hour yesterday morning the Old Bailey and all the avenues leading to it were crowded with persons, to witness the execution of Mary Chapman, for attempting to murder her child at Hammersmith [...] At the tolling of the prison bell, the procession proceeded to the scaffold, where it was joined by Chapman, who appeared to be perfectly resigned to her fate. [...] Mary Chapman, accompanied by Mr Baker, walked up, and placed herself under the fatal beam with the greatest firmness. She looked about her for a short period with much composure, and then said to the executioner "I am ready."

The ropes having been carefully adjusted, the Rev. Mr Cotton gave the usual signal, when the drop fell. (Anon. "Execution" *Times* July 23, 1829: 3)

While the nineteenth-century Medea of the London stage was performing for applause and acclamation the real-life Medea in the courtrooms of London was performing for her life.

Euripides' Medea resonated with nineteenth-century audiences because, like the young unmarried mothers cast out onto the streets as a result of the harsh New Poor Law, she too is an outcast. Euripides constantly reminds the audience that Medea is a foreigner, and he does so not to alienate the sympathies of his audience from her, but to emphasise that she is defenceless (Mead 17). Medea's position is hopeless, like the position of countless abandoned single mothers in nineteenth-century England who were forced into destitution by the betrayal of their lovers. It has to be said that many of the nineteenth-century men watching dramatic interpretations of Euripides' *Medea* on the London stage were concerned with the 'woman question' and would have seen Medea as a powerful and dangerous woman. Peter Quennell points out, "the pitilessness of Victorian moralists reveals not so much their lack of humanity as the sensations of extreme anxiety that moral problems caused them" (Quennell 14).

Theatre was above all an entertainment experience, but audiences were also aware of the social injustices and the gender inequalities of the times in which they lived. The story of Euripides' *Medea*, dwelling as it does, as one theatre critic wrote, "on the wrongs and hardships imposed upon women by nature or social law" ("Terry's Theatre" *Times* Nov. 30, 1909: 12), struck a chord at a time when women were fighting for their rights through campaigns to abolish such laws at the iniquitous New Poor Law of 1834 with its Bastardy Clause, and later in the century the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s, brought in to control venereal disease in the prostitute population.

It has been argued that Euripides' drama was in part influenced by the introduction of a harsh new law in 451 BC that restricted citizenship to those whose parents were both Athenians (Mead 16). Audiences in Victorian England viewed Medea's plight sympathetically because they too saw similarities with Medea's plight and that of the destitute, unmarried mothers who, through the introduction of a harsh new law, the 1834 New Poor Law with its iniquitous Bastardy Clause, were driven to kill their babies. The New Poor Law was introduced as a response to demands from parish wardens, social commentators and politicians for legislative reform to curb the increasing rate of

illegitimate births in England and ease the strain on parish coffers by controlling the sexual behaviour of single women. The economist and social reformer Thomas Malthus regarded the pre-1834 bastardy law as a “pernicious stimulus to unnecessary births” (Rose 24) because it provided parish support for unmarried mothers and their children, encouraging, he said, profligacy in young women. Malthus acknowledged the hardship that freeing the father from responsibility would bring to the mother, but saw this as “the invariable law of nature,” arguing it was for the woman to take care of her chastity. He saw the potential rise in infant mortality amongst illegitimate offspring as inevitable, claiming that population growth was self-regulating, as cycles of war, famine and disease eliminated the “surplus.”

There was widespread acceptance of Malthus’s theory that the road to reform lay in shifting the responsibility for bastard children onto the mother by denying her the support of the poor law (Malthus 183) with the *Times* supporting the need for legislative reform. The newspaper acknowledged the “moral and fiscal outrage” (Haller 2) of the current state of poor relief in an editorial in February 1834 stating that poor relief should be for the destitute and that, “at present relief of mothers of illegitimate children had reached a pitch extremely oppressive to the parishes and grievously detrimental to female morals throughout England” (*Times* Editorial Feb. 25, 1834: 4).

Five years after Mary Chapman swung at the gallows for the attempted murder of her infant the 1834 New Poor Law was introduced by the Whig government consigning thousands of abandoned unmarried mothers and their children to lives of destitution on the streets, or at the very least to the brutality of “that most detestable of all prisons,” as one *Times* letter-writer described the workhouse in 1838 (“New Poor Law” *Times* Aug. 15, 1838: 6). As a result of its introduction, young unmarried mothers, predominantly servants, were cast out onto the streets or into the workhouse by their masters and mistresses once their pregnancy became obvious. Homeless and destitute, with no prospects of gaining meaningful employment, they began killing their newborn babies in unprecedented numbers. The most influential newspaper of the day, the London *Times*, took the constrained reportage of young women’s ‘troubles’ out of the court news reports and reduplicated and repackaged infanticide court news as opinion in the influential leaders columns, in ‘hard’ news, in parliamentary and welfare reports, and in the correspondence pages.

Under the new law all illegitimate children were to be the sole responsibility of their mothers until they were 16 years old. The mothers of bastard children were placed in the same category as widows for poor relief. They were expected to support themselves and their offspring and, if unable to do so, they were forced into the workhouse in their parish (Goc 28). Under the Bastardy Clause of the new law men were, like Jason, able to abandon their lovers and their children to a life of poverty and destitution. In desperation many of these abandoned women killed their offspring. And while the Victorians condemned the ‘fallen’ young woman for her immoral actions, and believed she should be punished for the crime of infanticide, many also acknowledged that there was a gross inequity in a system that allowed the mother alone to bear the burden of an illegitimate child. In 1839 Mary Howitt’s poem, “Nature Versus Malthus,” written in opposition to

Malthus's theories, was published in the Chartist newspaper, *Northern Liberator*. According to Josphine McDonagh, Howitt's poem pitched the "deathly force of Malthus against the goodness of Prolific nature" (99):

Mid the mighty, 'mid the mean,
 Little children may be seen,
 Like the flowers that spring up fiar,
 Bright and countless everywhere.
 (Howitt, *Northern Liberator*, April 13, 1839; cited McDonagh 30)

Howitt's poem fed into the growing concerns and frustration people had with politicians and their consistent failure to redress the inequities of the new law. One letter-writer to the London *Times* in 1838 reflected this widespread frustration:

The frightful increase in child murder since the enactment of the New Poor Law has been so frequently brought before the public to no purpose, that you may not be disposed to publish any further remarks on the subject which our rulers consider of so little importance... ("New Poor Law Murders." Letters to the Editor *Times* Aug. 15, 1838: 6)

There is no doubt that the draconian New Poor Law of 1834 saw infanticide become a distinctive offence of Victorian England (Goc 29). Coroner's records reveal infanticide inquests were almost weekly occurrences after the introduction of the 1834 act and remained high until changes to the law in the 1870s. Infanticide was considered to be "particularly acute" in London where unmarried women "could hide the births and deaths of unwanted infants in the anonymity of a great city" (Higginbotham 319). For much of the nineteenth-century London alone accounted for about half of all homicides involving children reported in the Registrar General's reports for England and Wales. One social commentator, Henry Humble, reported that in London:

bundles are left lying about the streets, which people will not touch, lest the too familiar object—a dead body—should be revealed, perchance with a pitch-plaster over its mouth, or a woman's garter round its throat. Thus, too, the metropolitan canal boats are impeded, as they are tracked along, by the number of drowned infants with which they come in contact. (Humble 169)

While the Central Middlesex Coroner, Dr Thomas Wakley, claimed in 1861 that:

In London alone within the last five years the bodies of 500 children have been found under such circumstances as could leave no doubt that their lives had been intentionally sacrificed. Upwards of sixty were taken from the Thames, or from the neighbouring ponds or canals. More than 100 were discovered stowed away under railway arches, upon the door-steps of houses, or in cellars or other out of the way places... (*Lancet*, Sept. 1861; Ryan 50)

The *Times*, and other newspapers opposed to the new law, created an awareness of the plight of the unmarried mothers through stirring editorials and, intertextually, through news reports of infanticide inquest and trials, leading to a higher media profile for unmarried mothers facing charges of infanticide. At the same times as these influential news texts were setting the public agenda, various versions of Euripides' drama *Medea*, being performed on the stages of London struck a chord with audiences when the issue of illegitimate births and infanticide was high on the public agenda. The connections between the ancient Greek mythological figure, Medea, and the sordid desperate infanticidal mothers of London could not have been lost on the theatre patrons. As I argue below, it certainly was not lost on the actors. However, it should be noted that the motive of the desperate young woman killing her baby in Victorian London was vastly different from that of Medea who is always represented as a woman who happily gave birth to and lovingly raised her babies beyond infancy. The desperate unmarried mothers of London, without emotional or financial resources to rear an illegitimate child, believed infanticide was their only option. The common factor lies in the betrayal by the father of the mother, but in Medea's case at least Jason would gladly have taken his sons from Medea's hands. Medea was represented on the London stage as a tragic heroine as well as a victim, while the young women in the *Times* reports were represented as perpetrators of an unnatural crime, but also, after the introduction of the 1834 Poor Law, as victims of an unfair system.

The great Italian tragedian, Madame Adelaide Ristori, who was to make the part of Medea her own in the second half of the nineteenth century, approached the taboo subject of infanticide with a "view to arousing some degree of sympathy" from her audience through her careful staging (Bassnett 149). Madame Ristori perfected a pose in the opening act which became the iconic Ristori/Medea pose. Ristori later wrote in her memoirs how carefully she contrived the pose to reflect a moment in the attitude of a woman utterly exhausted (Ristori 1888). Ristori's Medea was "designed to highlight the plight of the seduced and abandoned woman, and outraged mother" (Aston 38-48; cited Bassnett 149).

Ristori is regarded as one of the greatest performers of the role of Medea of all time. In the 1850s she dazzled London audiences with her presence on the stage. Ristori was *the* Medea of the mid to late nineteenth century. She was born to be an actress; both parents were actors, and by the age of three months she had made her first appearance on the stage. At fifteen she was playing the heroine in Silvio Pollico's *Francesca da Rimini*. Between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four she was the leading tragic actress in Italy until her marriage in 1847 to the Marchese Giuliano Capranacia del Grillo. From this time motherhood and children became her "highest and most sacred passion" leading to her rejection of the role of Medea in any version because of the murder of the children (Anon. "Ristori Matinee" *Times* Nov. 30, 1908:10). Legouve had originally written the role of Medea for the famous French tragedian, Ristori's rival, Madame Rachel, in 1814, but she too had rejected the role on the grounds that his heroine was 'unnatural', despite Legouve's "amelioration of her crime" (Hall 56).

Ristori said she rejected the role of *Medea* earlier in her career because: "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" (Hall 56). The *Times* critic argued that Madame Ristori refused the role when she herself became a mother: "The fact that she [Ristori] became the mother of four children, two of whom died in infancy, weakened the hold of her art upon her affections" ("Ristori Matinee" *Times* Nov. 30, 1908). It was not until 1856 that Legouve finally persuaded Ristori to take on the role in his play *Medee* by explaining that his Medea killed her children for love of her children. Legouve made Medea more palatable to audiences making the killing of the children appear both justifiable and necessary. Susan Bassnett argues that Legouve's version of the story of Medea offered Ristori a means of "approaching the taboo subject [of infanticide] with a view to arousing some degree of sympathy and her careful staging accentuates that process" (149). Legouve's three-act adaptation of Euripides' drama dilutes Medea's responsibility for the death of her sons, transforming her motive into what Edith Hall calls an "altruistic motherly desire to prevent the Corinthians from subjecting them to a crueler death when they discover that she has murdered Jason's new wife" (Hall 56). Ristori crafted the role of Medea to evoke sympathy more than condemnation from the audience. According to Susan Bassnett, Ristori "sought to develop the portrayal of two emotions, jealousy and hatred" (150) in the making of Medea. Ristori's Medea was a compelling figure, a wronged wife, a mother betrayed and abandoned by the father of her children whose infanticidal actions were to release her children from a life of suffering. These were the same sentiments repeatedly reflected in the actions of abandoned mothers who were driven to kill their own children in the streets and byways of London. Madame Ristori was such a sensation in the role that rather than her swan song, it was to open up to the Italian "a triumphant career which occupied the greater part of her remaining years" (Anon. "Ristori's Matinee" *Times* Nov. 30, 1908: 10). She took the role of Medea all over Europe in a spectacular tour that played to packed houses wherever it went. (Billboards for her show can be seen in the narrative painting, *Roman Fish Market* 1856-57, by the American artist Albert Bierstadt.)

In her autobiography, *Studies and Memoirs* (1888), Ristori wrote that the role of Medea was the role she preferred above all others, and the one from which she learned the most. Susan Bassnett says Ristori's Medea was a:

wronged woman, not a savage, a noble mother and wife driven over the edge of reason by the callous indifference of Jason, the man in whom she had placed her trust. In this respect her Medea is a post-Romantic construction, an individual struggling to retain control over forces that destroy her from within. (Bassnett 150)

The understanding of Medea's actions as a woman who allows her emotions to overtake rational thought, however, allowed for the diagnosis of mental instability to be inscribed upon a woman's infanticidal actions. In the nineteenth century this understanding provided an acceptable way for the judicial system to deal with women who killed their babies and saved juries and judges from the unpalatable task of sentencing mothers to death by hanging (Emmerichs 1993; Goc 2007; Higginbotham, 1989). This understanding of infanticide, promoted as it was by a medical profession keen to establish the lucrative asylum institution, became the accepted rationale for a mother's actions, a

rationale that still predominates our understanding of infanticide today.

In the summer of 1856, at a time when there was a prominent discourse in the editorial pages of the *Times* on the rise in the number of mothers killing their babies, Madame Ristori's London performance of Legouve's *Medee* was being regarded as one of the greatest theatrical representations of Medea of all time. According to the *Times* critic Legouve departed from the simple plot of Euripides "with the most noble disregard of precedent" (Anon. "Lyceum Theatre" *Times* June 5, 1856: 12). Reporting on Madame Ristori's performance the following week the *Times* critic claimed "her very walk across the rocks in the background is in itself a great work of art on the part of the actress." Her dress was said to resemble the "female figures on Etruscan vases," while the actress herself was "intensely alive," and "with sorrow speaking from every line of the countenance" Madame Ristori's performance in which the "maternal feeling" was "rendered all-prominent" and "all solicitude of Medea was for the fate of her children, whose father, for all she knows to the contrary, may have perished, and who were "literally crying from hunger" (Anon. "Lyceum Theatre" *Times* June 9, 1856: 7) drew sympathetic sighs from the audience. The audience was enthralled from the moment Ristori appeared on stage:

This was *the* Ristori—this was Medea, in whom the maternal principle was at once made prominent to heighten the horror of the catastrophe. The demeanour was proud and commanding, the countenance was of the haughtiest in its outline, the eye was dark and flashing, and though the only feeling delineated was suffering (for Medea, according to M. Legouve, has lost Jason, and has become a homeless wanderer), the aspect was of a suffering queen. A thunder of acclamations followed, --almost anticipated her appearance,--and even when she had uttered the few first lines, instructing her children to kneel before the temple with suppliant boughs in their hands, and implore protection, there was such a tenderness in her tone that a gasp of sympathy might be heard in every direction. The charm of the voice, the power of modulating it were so manifest that none could resist its fascination. (Anon. "Lyceum Theatre" *Times* June 5, 1856: 12)

George Eliot, who was to create her own Medea narrative three years later with the publication of *Adam Bede* (1859), attended a performance of Ristori's Medea in the summer of 1856 with her partner George Henry Lewes. Lewes later wrote that Madame Ristori "completely conquered" him (Hall 58). The character of Medea had a significant and lasting impact on Eliot as she drew upon the Medea myth in further books, namely *Felix Holt* (1865) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876). Josephine McDonagh argues that Mrs Transome in *Felix Holt* is "a Medea-like figure; her rage with the world rumbles portentously throughout the narrative" (167); while in *Daniel Deronda*, the Medea story "has a firmer presence as a myth that reflects more directly on the central theme of the novel –illegitimacy and social exclusion" (167).

The force of the Medea narrative extended to the opera, where the most popular operas of the story to be performed on the Victorian stage were Luigi Cherubini's *Medee* and Simon Mayr's *Medea in Corinth*. Cherubini's *Medee*, first performed in 1797, was

regarded as “one of the most imposing and remarkable performances of modern times” when it was performed in the mid 1860s (“Her Majesty’s” *Times* Aug. 10, 1865). In the third and final act Medea, denied her children and betrayed by her husband, steps against the backdrop of a violent storm, a black veil over her face, and meets her confidante Neris who pushes the children into her arms. Medea is torn between her love for her children and her intention of seeking revenge for their father’s betrayal. In a scene filled with pathos she wrestles with her love for her sons and her plans to murder them in revenge for their father’s betrayal. Off stage the audience hears the death cries of Dirce, poisoned by Medea, then a distraught Jason begs Medea to return his children, but amidst the pyrotechnic tempest (that thrilled London audiences) Medea slaughters her young sons, then stridently calls to Jason that she will wait for him on the banks of the Styx. In the final scene Medea sets fire to the temple and as the crowd escapes from the blaze, and as the flames engulf the palace, thunderbolts heighten the terror and the mountain and temple collapse and Medea disappears amongst the burning ruins. Cherubini’s opera, with its dramatic stage sets, powerful compositions, and containing “some of the sublimest passages in dramatic music” (“Her Majesty’s” June 7, 1865) and a compelling plot, the critic reported, had endured as one of the most performed adaptations of Euripides’ *Medea*.

Simon Mayr’s *Medea in Corinto*, regarded as Mayr’s greatest theatrical success, was first performed in Naples in 1813 and was possibly influenced by Cherubini’s 1797 opera. Mayr’s opera is based both on Euripides’ play and French tragedian Pierre Corneille’s 1660 version of the ancient myth *Toison d’or* (*The Golden Fleece*). Madame Pasta, an Italian opera singer who first performed as Medea in Mayr’s opera at the King’s Theatre in 1826, was regarded as the greatest operatic Medea of the age. Charles Dickens was first introduced to the theatre through a performance by Madame Pasta in *Medea of Corinth*, later recording: “My first visit to a London theatre dates as far back as 1826, in which year I heard Pasta—then in her prime—and Curioni in Mayr’s “Medea in Corinto” (Dickens 129). Such was the popularity of Madame Pasta’s performance that a year after her debut the prices of the boxes doubled in a week due to the demand for seats. The *Times* critic told readers that “those who like to see the terrible and sublime relieved by the gentle and amiable, will be delighted at the contrast of Madame Pasta’s Medea to Madame Caradori’s Creusa” (“Her Majesty’s Theatre” *Times* May 24, 1827: 2). Three years later in 1831 when Madame Pasta returned to the London stage there were “loud and long-protracted plaudits from every part of the house [...] the loudest applause that ever was heard within these walls” (“Her Majesty’s Theatre” *Times* May 13, 1831: 2).

The theatre was clearly a contested cultural space in nineteenth-century England, with one disgruntled attendee at a London performance of Mayr’s *Medea of Corinth* in 1831 complaining about a number of “loose women in the pit of the Opera House” (“R” *Times* June 20, 1831: 5). This high-minded correspondent to the *Times* complained at what he regarded as “a shameful exhibition” after the first act when “two notorious females” entered the pit, which was full, and “pushed their way down the alley in the most brazen way, attracting general attention, their dress and manner sufficiently indicating the class to which they belonged, and no one caring to move for them on that account.” When two gentlemen left their seats in protest the women sat down and began “laughing, joking

with, and sometimes talking to them,” and “sufficiently advertised their presence to those who before were unconscious of the fact” as to cause offence (“R” *Times*, June 20, 1831: 5). This, readers were told, was not the only time in which “immodest women” had occupied seats in the pits at a performance of *Medea*, and the manager was called upon to cease “permitting females of a certain description to infest the boxes.” As a post script the correspondent suggested “the expulsion of prostitutes from places which are expressly set apart for the moral and virtuous classes of society” (“R” *Times*, June 20, 1831: 5). The tone of the letter reflects the high moral ground taken by educated middle-class men who saw it as their duty to keep a watchful eye on the moral behaviour of all females. The ‘fallen woman’ was an outcast in Victorian society and the ‘whore’ was regarded with “remarkable venom” (Trudgill 104), a kind of moral monster. In 1856 the *Times* was reporting that “in no capital city of Europe” was there “daily and nightly such a shameless display of prostitution as in London” (“Police” Jan. 8, 1856: 6). Men from the “moral and virtuous” classes of society supported Malthus’s view on the profligacy of girls and the need to remove any support for unmarried mothers, moves which saw desperate, abandoned young women cast out of domestic service and turn to prostitution where, in a circular irony, they serviced these very same men as a means of survival. A large proportion of prostitutes in nineteenth-century England had once been domestic servants, who, having fallen pregnant to a member of the household—often the master—were summarily dismissed. Forced onto the streets without means of support they turned to prostitution while their ‘respectable’ seducers, some of them no doubt in the audience at performances of *Medea*, (and who probably sympathised with Jason’s sentiment that procreation has always been a curse to men: “It would have been better far for men/To have got their children in some other way, and women/Not to have existed. Then life would have been good” lines [573-575]) were never made accountable. As Peter Stearns argues, the pater familias in the middle-class homes of England did not always match the ideal. Studies of paternity suits, settlement examinations, letters, and evidence given to commissions of enquiry and quarter sessions records confirms the:

view of popular literature that in some middle-class homes sheltered from public view young female working-class servants were regularly faced with actual or attempted seduction by the wealthier middle-class employers or their sons whilst sexual harassment of lower middle-class owners could be found in the workplace. (Stearns 585-600)

The “loose women in the pit of the Opera House” would have recognised in *Medea*’s plight a common bond of female vulnerability. These disenfranchised London women would have been familiar with the motives of the stage *Medea*, a woman cast out from society, and her transformation from a love-struck bride to a bold, fearless, empowered woman. And for some of the prostitutes attending performances of *Medea* in the West-End during these decades the dramatic infanticidal actions of the *Medea* on the stage would have chillingly reflected their own real-life experiences.

During the years when the issue of infanticide remained on high on the public agenda the *Medea* of the stage was a far more sympathetic character than had previously been portrayed. In 1845 the dramatist Mark Lemon wrote a contemporary take on the Greek

myth in a burlesque *Medea, or, a Libel on the Lady of Colchi* in which he portrayed Medea sympathetically. The term ‘burlesque’ was applied in the nineteenth century to a wide range of comic plays that entertained the lower and middle classes by making fun of (or ‘burlesquing’) the operas, plays and social habits of the upper classes. These shows used comedy and music to challenge the established way of looking at things. Lemon’s *Medea, or, a Libel on the Lady of Colchi* played to full houses at the Adelphi Theatre and, according to Edith Hall, explored the social reality that Medea would have encountered if she had been abandoned in Victorian London rather than in archaic Corinth (Hall 58). Medea, in Lemon’s version, has been forced to train her children in the art of pick pocketing because “one’s vile husband no allowances makes” (Hall 58). One reviewer found the plot of Lemon’s burlesque a bit too close to home, remarking that the audience saw only “the wronged wife, the wretched woman, demanding sympathy, and forbidding laughter” (cited Hall 58). In the same year playwright J. R. Planche, well known for his burlesque productions at the Haymarket, returned to *Medea* for the creation of his 1845 extravaganza *The Golden Fleece*.

At the same time as Ristori was playing in *Medea* to packed houses and rave revues at the up-market Lyceum Theatre in 1856, two rival burlesques on the theme of Medea starring transvestite male actors opened in London. By the mid-nineteenth century theatrical burlesques consisted of “parodying a serious literary work which served merely as a framework for songs, dances, puns, harmless topical allusions, and an imposed happy ending” (Mackie 162). The most highly acclaimed burlesque performance of the mid-nineteenth century was Frederick Robson’s performance of Robert Brough’s 1856 *Medea; or, the Best of Mothers, with a Brute of a Husband*. The burlesque opened in July 1856 at the Royal Olympic Theatre and ran to full houses until September and then from October to November of the same year. Robson played the part dressed in a yellow skirt and bodice, trimmed with cabalistic characters in black, larger brown cloak, ringlet wig, ribbons in his hair and sandals (Brough 1). In Brough’s original script Medea was “a conjugal lesson, surpassing in intensity anything of a similar description attempted even at this establishment, an awful warning to every single individual” (Brough 1). Jason, played by Miss Julia St George, was “a hero of antiquity, of fabulous courage, about to marry the second time without the slightest hesitation” (Brough 1).

Robson was regarded as the greatest male performer in burlesque of his day – drama critic Edmund Watson declared him the greatest actor that had been seen on the English stage since Edmund Kean (Watson). In the role of Medea Robson parodied the great Madame Ristori with “melodramatic abandonment and lashing-up to a certain point of excitement” (Hall 58). As a burlesque star Robson took the role of Medea more seriously than could have been expected and according to critics and classics scholars Robson’s Medea was “more truly tragic than Ristori’s” version (Hall 58). The *Times* reviewer found Robson’s performance in the role of Medea moving: “What he does is to sympathise with the character he undertakes, just as Madame Ristori enters into the character written by M. Legouve, and to develop it from his own resources” (Anon. “Lyceum Theatre” *Times* July 15, 1856: 12). But where Madame Ristori captured audiences with her statuesque stance and her histrionics, the rather diminutive Robson, in his transvestite impersonation of Medea, according to the *Times* critic, left his audience

with the uncertainty of whether to laugh or cry:

The dark, lowering look, with which he surveys his intended victim comprises so much of tragic intensity, with so much that belongs to the moody virago of low life, that it leaves you in doubt whether you ought to laugh or to shudder, but the burst of feeling with which he calls down a blessing on the head of Creusa, when he thinks that he has murdered her, and suddenly discovers that she has protected the children, is a touch of genuine, heart-rending pathos that ought to excite tears rather than smiles. (Anon. "Lyceum Theatre" *Times* July 15, 1856: 12)

One critic wrote: "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 thrill with painful sympathy" (Hall 60); another that "Robson's Medea was 'sublime in its savage intensity, and life-like and human in its commonplace features'" (Hall 60). He was said to have portrayed the "tigerish affection" through the medium of "doggerel and slang with astonishing force and vigour" (Hall 60). According to Edith Hall, Robson "won more sympathy than any previous actor on the British stage for his portrayal of Medea perhaps because his audience found it easier to deal with Medea's challenge to conventional notions of femininity when the actor impersonating her was a man" (Hall 60). The script allowed the audience to be sympathetic to the abandoned mother, whose words reflected the plight of so many abandoned mothers:

I don't belong to
 hereabouts or thereabouts,
 Woman! For months I haven't had a whereabouts.
 I lodge at number nothing –nowhere.
Nurse: shrieking terrified: spare me!
Medea: (with increasing wildness) Nobody'll have me—
 Nobody can hear me!
 Nobody will keep me, with my woes import'nate;
 Or if they do a week, they won't a fortnight.
 To overseers, if I make application
 To join the Union, there's conflagration:
 To model lodgings I'm not endurable—
 Hospitals kick me out, as past incurable!
 Soup kitchens don't consider me the ticket—
 I'm even bowl'd out at the gaoler's wicket.
 (Brough 12)

In the final scene of the play Medea is distraught that her sons' affection seems to have been stolen away by Creusa's gifts of "ponies, kites and delicious pies," and in jealous rage she presents a poisoned robe to Creusa, only to find that her rival in a gesture of generosity, returns her sons:

I sympathise with your unhappy lot,

Though forced by my pape, your spouse to marry,
 I would not, needlessly, your feelings harry,
 Your children I restore. Should wants distress you,
 I enclose money – may the heaven’s bless you.’
 (Brough 32-33)

When Medea hears Jason approaching she fears his anger and convinces herself that it was Jason who made her kill Creusa, she gathers her sons to her and behind the gathering crowd the audience hears the plaintive cries of her children. The crowd start back with a shriek of horror and Medea is seen standing alone, on the steps, “quivering with emotion – a reeking knife in her hand, the children lying on the steps (apparently dead)” (Brough 35). But this is burlesque and in an instant the dagger in Medea’s hand is transformed into a jester’s bauble, Creusa arrives with Orpheus – she is alive, as are Medea’s sons, who stand up from the steps and run towards her (Brough 35).

The real-life Medeas living in the East of London found more efficient ways to surreptitiously dispose of the bodies of their dead babies, and thus escaped detection more successfully than the Medeas of North and Central London (Goc 42). While working-class women in the slums of East London were successfully disposing of their babies in the middle of the century, for the first time, the story of Medea was performed to working-class audiences in the East End. In 1859 John Heraud’s popular play *Medea in Corinth* played at the Standard Theatre in Shoreditch. This theatre had a capacity of 5,000 and the theatre was packed for each of its 12 nights, which meant that up to 60,000 working class Londoners saw Medea in action. In the play Heraud allows Medea to kill her children to save them from the Corinthians. Edith Hall believes it was such a successful interpretation of Euripides’ play because it “was an entertaining and provocative response to its times” (Hall 64). This version continued to enjoy revivals into the 1870s.

While the play was being performed at the Shoreditch theatre in 1859, one young real-life Medea who had been abandoned by her lover, nineteen-year-old Mary Jones, was facing execution for the murder of her newborn child. Mary, according to the *Times*, “had been seduced and was delivered of the child in question at the house of a person where she was staying temporarily.” The murder “took place during the agony of a first confinement, aggravated by the misery and distress of the position in which she was placed...” (“Convict Mary Jones” *Times* April 8, 1859: 3). When Mary was found guilty “the learned judge passed the sentence of death in the usual form, and the prisoner, who fainted when he had concluded, was carried out of the court insensible” (“Police” *Times* March 30, 1859: 12). Immediately under this report is another report of an infanticide trial, of a Mary Ann Adams, 29, who was charged with “unlawfully endeavouring to conceal the birth of her illegitimate child.” Mary was a servant to a “gentleman at Dulwich” and in February last delivered a child. A man who had been employed to empty a cesspool on the property found the body of the child, “cut into no less than 27 pieces.” Because it could not be determined if the child had been born alive or dead, Mary was found guilty of concealment of a birth and she was imprisoned and kept at hard labour for 18 calendar months (“Police” *Times* March 30, 1859: 12).

Changes to the Poor Law in 1870, making both the mother and father responsible for the care of an illegitimate child, saw a steep reduction in the number of infanticides in London and the concomitant displacement of infanticide from the news agenda. Whether coincidental or consequential, there was also a waning in the popularity of *Medea* on the London stage. In June 1863 Madame Ristori returned to the London stage for the final time in the role of Medea. “All her more remarkable points and poses were at once recognized,” and she was called before the curtain at the end of each act,” according to the *Times* critic. “Medea is the piece in which she displays the greatest variety of emotion, and her fine picturesque delineation was fully appreciated” (“Her Majesty’s Theatre” *Times* June 16, 1863: 11). Such was her celebrity status that two days later the newspaper ran a 1000-word feature on Madame Ristori extolling her greatness (“Her Majesty’s Theatre” *Times*, June 18, 1863: 14) and again ten days later published another lengthy feature on the great tragedian (Anon. “Madame Ristori” *Times* June 29, 1863: 5).

In this article I have drawn attention to the overlapping discourses of infanticide news reports and *Medea* theatre reviews in the London *Times* that emerged in the years between the New Poor Law of 1834 and its modification in 1870. While I have not argued that the popularity of performances of *Medea* can be directly attributed to the “real world” of nineteenth-century London where young Medeas were cast out onto the streets, rejected by their lovers and murdered their children, there are clear resonances between the theatrical and courtroom discourses and their fascination for audiences and readers. Through the grim news texts of infanticide trials and inquests, and through the rallying editorials in the *Times* calling on the country’s leaders to bring an end to the iniquities of the Bastardy Clause in the New Poor Law, a picture of the world in which the dramatic representation of Medea was brought to the London stage is created. While Londoners were being entertained by multiple variations of Euripides’ *Medea* in operas, dramas and burlesques, real-world Medeas became a focus of news and public discourse through an increase in infanticide. In some instances dramatists reflected this public sympathy and created sympathetic versions *Medea*. By challenging the world in which they lived, by refusing to submit their offspring to destitution and starvation, and death in the workhouse, the young ‘Medeas’ of London were as courageous in their actions, as Euripides’ mythological heroine. Both the real-life Medeas of the streets of London and the ancient Greek goddess acted politically when killing their children, but while the mythical Medea escaped in the flying chariot to a better life in Athens, sadly all too many of the artless Medeas of London were caught literally red-handed and faced the ignominy of public naming and shaming in the press and transportation, imprisonment, and for some, death on the gallows.

Notes

ⁱ This paper uses Rex Warner’s 1944 translation of Euripides’ *Medea*.

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- Anon. "Old Bailey" *Times* June 16, 1829: 4
- Anon. "Execution" *Times* July 23 1829: 3
- Anon. "Her Majesty's Theatre" *Times* May 13, 1831: 2
- Anon. "Infanticide" *Times* May 13, 1831: 2
- "R." Letter *Times* June 20, 1831: 5
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