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# MEDEA

From monstrous-feminine to self-determined woman:  
An analysis of Rachel Cusk’s version of Medea

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# 1 Introduction

Who is Medea? First of all, she is a woman. More specific, she is the main character of Euripides' eponymous Greek tragedy *Medea* whose story seems to be timeless, as it has been adapted and retold countless times. But are we looking at her destiny or is she just mirroring ours? She is a symbol and she is unique; her deeds are truly ambivalent.

In 2015, Rachel Cusk, a British writer, presented her version of *Medea* in the Almeida Theatre, London, with the help of the director Rupert Goold. Her version offers many approaches for interpretation and does not depend on the original play, nevertheless this paper compares both versions, Cusks and a translation of Euripides' version of Philip Vellacott, in order to explore in how far Medea's motives and her perception have changed. Especially since the late 1960s, when the interest in gender aspects of Greek tragedies increased (Foley 2004: 77), *Medea* has been most popular as a framework for revision of gender issues in this genre (ibd.: 103). She "has been used to explore feminist rage [...] and female exploitation" (ibd.: 104) and personifies ambiguous gendered perceptions, what isolates her and lets her appear as a dangerous creature. It is this part of her, the dangerous, monstrous part, that serves as a basis for the central thesis of this paper: In Euripides' version, Medea is presented as a "monstrous-feminine figure", whereas Cusk created a Medea who the audience can identify with more easily, since her deeds are less cruel. In order to prove this process of transformation, the term "monstrous-feminine" will be clarified first. For this purpose, relevant findings of British feminist film theorist Barbara Creed are presented and transferred to Euripides' version of *Medea* to verify the first part of the thesis. The reader's knowledge of Euripides' *Medea* is taken for granted, but before referring to the thesis again, a summary of Cusk's play is given. The main part is divided into a chapter concentrating on the statement that the audience is (more) likely to identify with Cusk's Medea and another chapter focusing on the motivation and the extent of her revenge. In addition to other sources, a text written by Cusk herself, as well as an interview with her by Susanna Rustin are included to confirm certain statements based on her intention.

## 2 The monstrous-feminine

Usually, female characters presented in fiction can be assigned to one of the following stereotypes: wife, mother, daughter, virgin, whore, career woman and/or femme fatale (Creed 1993: 151). Creed analyzed female stereotypes in horror films in particular and added the category of the woman as monster, or the monstrous-feminine. In order to explain what it is that makes a monster terrifying, Creed adapts Kristeva's insights concerning the abject, which she defines as something that "disturbs identity, system, order" and "does not respect borders, positions, rules" (Kristeva 1982: 4, as cited by Chaudhuri 2006: 91). The abject is fascinating and horrifying the same time, because it represents ambiguity and transgresses moral boundaries, and so does the monster. Chaudhuri offers a great summary of Creed's definition of abject: Although the

abject is, ultimately, part of ourselves, we reject it, expelling it and locating it outside the self, designating it as 'not-me', in order to protect our boundaries. [...] The monster is what 'crosses or threatens to cross the "border"', for example, the border between human and non-human; natural and supernatural; normal and abnormal gender behavior and sexual desire; the clean, proper, well-formed, and the dirty or deformed body (Creed 2001: 11). Finally, Creed's third class of the abject is the maternal. Female monstrosity in the horror film is nearly always depicted in relation to mothering and reproductive functions. (ibid. 2006: 93)

As stated in the quotation, locating the monster outside the self and calling it the 'Other' makes the first class of the abject. Crossing the border between, for instance, human and non-human, or normal and abnormal gender behavior, would make the second, and monstrosity in relation to the reproductive functions makes the third class. By looking at Euripides' *Medea*, parallels between *Medea* and the monstrous-feminine are already indicated. However, Creed subdivided this complex category into "a number of different figures of female horror; woman as archaic mother, monstrous womb, vampire, possessed monster, femme castratrice, witch, castrating mother" (Creed 1993: 151). She differentiates especially between images which reinforce patriarchal structures because female sexuality and the maternal are presented as abject, and images which challenge these structures because women are usually presented as passive victims (ibid.: 104). Two of these figures, the archaic mother and the castrating woman, will be discussed in more detail and in relation to *Medea*.

## 2.1 The archaic mother

Kristeva called it “fear of the uncontrollable generative mother” (ibid. 1982: 78, as cited by Creed 1993: 22), which already indicates the power of this figure. The archaic mother can create and procreate by herself, however, with the same power, she can destroy life. She is not human, instead she reminds of a goddess, who acts outside morality and human laws. For the concept of the archaic mother, the feminine does not depend on a concept of the masculine (ibid.: 27f.). In how far can Euripides’ Medea be seen as an archaic mother?

First, Medea behaves like and wants to be treated as a heroine. This can be seen in her decisions, the ways she talks and how others describe her (Easterling 2003: 196; Foley 2001: 251f.). Moreover, she adapts characteristics of a non-human creature, especially when she appears in a chariot drawn by serpents above the roof. Her skills as sorceress and her relation to gods and goddesses such as Hecate and Helios, her grandfather, are additional reasons for her division from “normal” human beings (Easterling 2003: 187). Finally, it is the fact that the gods do not punish her for her deeds, that indicate her otherness. They judge her actions as a compensation for Jason’s selfish behavior and the breaking of the oath when he married her (Foley 2001: 244).

Besides her superhuman nature, Medea is well known for killing her children. Easterling argues that this “horrific act is something from which we naturally recoil. ‘No sane person’, we say, ‘would do such a thing’” (ibid. 2003: 187). However, this is not the first time Medea murdered. She killed her brother, Creon and his daughter, too. The reasons for her deeds might have differed, but they demonstrate her ability to annihilate life the same way she creates it. As she is a woman, it is natural for her to give birth to children. But the term “creating” in this context includes even more: Medea is able to manipulate everyone around her and going a step further, it can even be stated that she made Jason what he is (Vellacott 2004: 151). She therefore is an active character, contradicting the patriarchal structures and embodying independence (Foley 2001: 250f.).

## 2.2 The castrated and/or castrating woman

Both, the image of the feminine as archaic mother, as well as that of the castrating woman threaten, because sexual difference is embodied (Creed 1993: 22). The castrated woman lacks a penis, which arouses men's fear of castration. Freud explains that it is the little boy who already notices the difference between his and his mother's genitals and that he consequently assumes his mother has been castrated. Based on that fear men need to oppress women and degrade them to passive objects, what Creed uncovers with her studies on the "male gaze". She uses Freud's insights to define the castrated woman, but criticizes him for ignoring men's fear of the castrating woman as castrator. She argues that in many images women are symbolically castrated, but on the other hand, they can also function as agents of castration (ibid.: 152). As Creed mainly focused on horror films, the following quote illustrates the given definition regarding to the slasher genre:

The heroine of the slasher film is also represented as a castrating figure – a crucial point which is largely ignored in critical discussions of the genre. Clover emphasizes the savage nature of her revenge. In dispatching the killer, the heroine frequently engages in castrating, symbolic or literal. [...] This litany of horrific deeds enacted on the male slasher's body reads like a passage from an ancient myth or legend about a fate of the wandering hero who was foolish enough to arouse the anger of the female monster [...]. (ibid.: 126)

Clover suggests that the female monster is not a typically 'feminine' figure, which Creed proves to be wrong (ibid.: 126f.). However, this debate reminds of the one whether Medea was typically feminine. Foley called it an "androgynous shift from beleaguered female to empowered, 'heroic avenger'" (Foley 2004: 90). What finally marks her as castrating woman is her wish not to kill Jason, but to punish him by taking any possibility for him to be a father again and thereby to ruin his future. The importance of children for men is highlighted often in *Medea* (Easterling 2003: 193) and by killing his sons and his bride-to-be, Medea's actions can be interpreted as a castration in the figurative sense.

### 2.3 Medea as monstrous-feminine

All in all, Medea represents the monstrous-feminine, whether in the sense of the archaic mother or the castrating woman. She shows parallels to both categories and inverts the stereotypical assumptions of male and female, although it can be argued that a complete inversion is only realized towards the end of the play, when Jason moans about Medea's cruelty. Society's ambivalent attitude towards the monster corresponds to the audience's attitude towards Medea: Although "society teaches us to be morally appalled by its terrible deeds, rarely is the monster presented as wholly unsympathetic. Indeed, part of us takes delight in its actions and identifies with them" (Chaudhuri 2006: 92). Medea's lust for revenge is certainly a feeling many recipients can identify with, and especially because of her suffering at the beginning of the play the audience is likely to sympathize with her. Nevertheless, the extent of her revenge is finally the decisive factor for the difference between us and her – the other – and our limited degree of identification.

## 3 Summary of Rachel Cusk's version

Rachel Cusk changed Medea into a woman in our present time, living in a big house in London with her two sons. Her soon-to-be ex-husband Jason has prepared the divorce papers, while being already engaged with Glauce, a young and wealthy woman whose father seems to be an influential person in the media sector. Since Medea works as a writer quite successfully and Jason is about to become a famous actor, some employees help in the house, namely the cleaner, the tutor and the nurse.

Just by looking at the list of characters, one remarkable difference to the original version can be noticed: The cleaner has been added as a new character. She is a woman from Brazil and like Medea, she is divorced and left her son behind (with her mother), because the father left the family. Throughout the play she is an important character, mirroring Medea's situation, commenting on it, comparing it to her own and showing understanding. This support is not given by a chorus, which had been replaced by five married mothers. Even in the list of characters the term

“chorus” is not to be found, instead “woman 1/2/3/4/5” is listed. The resulting effects of this drastic change will be discussed in a later chapter.

The adaptation’s structure shows a lot of similarities, although the narration, subdivided into nineteen scenes, differs in many points. The frame, however, stayed nearly the same: The play opens with a prologue including the nurse and the tutor who talk about motherhood and the role of a mother, especially when it comes to divorce, while Medea is in a room, crying. The general situation is explained by many characters, such as Jason, who left a message on her answering machine, the five women, indirectly by her sons, the cleaner and of course by Medea herself. Cusk integrated the scene with Creon, too, and she has to listen to his insulting words. He tries to save his daughter since he is aware of Medea’s intelligence. But instead of forcing her to move, he pressurizes her by mentioning his connections to her agent. The divorce papers she is meant to sign contain a privacy clause, which equals a disarming. Like in the original, the crucial Aegeus scene is placed right in the middle of the narration and is essential in regards of the play’s ending. Aegeus makes a pact with Medea to save his career: She will write a novel for him, while he writes a play for her. In the second half, Medea is often shown sitting on her desk, writing. As the messenger will tell us in the second to last scene, the action of writing serves as equivalent to Medea’s forging of her plans for revenge. Her weapons are neither poison, nor swords, but words, which are not less destructive. As the children distract her from writing and because Jason breaks their agreements about taking them from time to time repeatedly, Medea finally brings them to Jason and leaves them there, against the boys’ will.

Based on the messenger’s information, we get to know that Medea’s revenge lay in the writing of a novel in exchange for a script which turned from fiction to fact. Everything Aegeus wrote became reality and destroyed Jason’s and Glauce’s lives. Glauce got stuck in her role as stepmother, gained weight, started to drink and lost all her friends. She finally lost her beauty due to an acid attack and her father’s business collapsed. Their house was sold and Jason’s career as an actor got negated by the press. In the very last scene Jason calls Medea to tell her that the children kicked Glauce’s dog, her only friend, to death and were taken to hospital, because they ate a bottle of painkillers. Whether they survived or not, is left open. Medea, however, does not show much interest in their destiny, she just answers: “I’ll see

you dead” (Cusk 2015a: 107). The last words belong to the cleaner (not to the chorus, like in the original), who dreams of travelling to the beach enjoying life.

Compared to the original, Cusk paid more attention to dialogues between Jason and Medea and included two monologues of Jason in form of messages on the answering machine. Additionally, dialogues with the two boys also play a major role. What is missing is the famous scene about her inner debate whether she should kill the children, because this is not part of her revenge. Although she is no foreigner like Euripides’ Medea, Cusk’s Medea shares the role of the outsider, too. As a writer and poet, she does not see the world like other women. She is constantly demanding for truth and sees herself not as a stereotypical woman, but as equal to her partner. In society’s eyes, these aspects turn her into a stranger they can’t relate to.

#### 4 Medea as figure of identification

The more we sympathize with Medea, the less she appears to be alien. The monster is something we do not understand, something we are not able to grasp or explain. You can’t trust the monstrous-feminine, as she crosses borders and transgresses rules (legitimated or not) and is therefore unpredictable. In the original, Medea is introduced as a victim and turns out to be monstrous later on. Therefore, an identification with her is possible, even in Euripides’ version. However, several aspects diminish her presentation as monstrous-feminine in Cusk’s version: First, the cruel fantasies of revenge are initially verbalized by the cleaner, who dreamed of killing her ex-husband and his new wife “twice as bad” (Cusk 2015a: 24). As a supporting character, the cleaner stays passive and no danger arises from her thoughts. Medea does show interest in the cleaner’s fantasies, as seen in the following dialogue:

Medea: How would you do it?

Cleaner: What?

Medea: How would you punish them? [...]

There must be some way to punish them. (ibd.)

Nevertheless, based on her presentation so far, the audience is likely not to “overrate” this interest. In the original version, the nurse considers the possibility

of a dramatic turning point initiated by Medea and resulting in a tragic scenario (Vellacott 2004: 138). Since Medea has already been characterized as somebody who is in fact able to kill, this foreshadowing is far more alarming than the cleaner's wishful thinking.

Compared to Euripides' version, Cusk's Medea is more victimized, especially by Jason. This injustice increases our sympathy for her and moves her away from the monstrous-feminine. On the one hand, Jason and Creon try to weaken her by the privacy clause, although words are her weapons and ensure her existence. They are afraid of Medea's intelligence and try to protect their "new" family, what conforms to Creon's demand in the original that Medea has to leave the country. On the other hand, Jason also asks her to leave the house, because he wants to sell it. This demand has nothing to do with protecting people of Medea's rage, but is only selfish, since Jason wants to have more money to improve his status in his fiancée's eyes. Moreover, she is disadvantaged, also in terms of her job, because he constantly breaks promises about supporting her by taking the children for some time and he humiliates her by demanding his mother's pearl choker back, since it should stay in the (new) family. In contrast to Euripides' version, Medea has to bear many insults, deriving especially from the other women, Creon, the nurse and Jason and concerning her age, her divorce and skills as a mother, her search for truth and her emotions:

The trouble with women is they can't accept that after a certain age they have no function. (Cusk 2015a: 40);  
Considering divorce means to take yourself too seriously. (ibid.: 10);  
Divorce is very ageing, you know. Women tend to lose weight – they get all excited by that, but it's far too late. (ibid.: 39);  
I'd be calling Childline (ibid.: 21);  
Feminism is 'just another word for girls keeping dirty habits' (ibid.: 9);  
Crying is 'ageing' (ibid.: 8);  
Anger is so ugly in a woman. (ibid.: 42).

The insults reflect the view of a patriarchal and highly misogynistic society and they appear to be normal. Medea's view as that of the other or the outsider is contrasted and isolated. What is mostly notable about the insults is the fact that women use them the same way men do it, what signals the great extent to which these women adapted the mechanisms of patriarchal oppression.

Cusk made a crucial decision by changing the function of the chorus: First, her "women 1/2/3/4" seem to replace the chorus, but instead of supporting the protagonist, they reflect society's view and are therefore on the opposite side.

Easterling described the chorus in the original as a group of “peripheral figures whose role is not to do and suffer but to comment, sympathize, support or disapprove” (ibid. 2003: 188) and goes on by explaining that with “the chorus she is at her most frank and open, winning their whole-hearted support with her account of the miseries of a woman’s life” (ibid.: 191). Cusk’s Medea does not enjoy such support: “Despite her high social status she is without family or friends, and indeed that very status locks her out of the local female network that otherwise – as the mother of children – might have embraced her” (Cusk 2015b). Rustin described these women as “a gaggle of mothers at the school gates” (ibid.: 2015). Their conversations are a reflection of idle words and empty, superficial catchphrases, such as “It’s the children you’ve got to feel sorry for” (ibid.: 20), “You’ve just got to keep it together for the children” (ibid.: 21), or “Men are so – horrible” (ibid.: 88). Medea’s words are more authentic and complex, for example when she blames them for lying ““all warm in your bed of compromise” (ibid.: 21), being too comfortable to face the truth: “You learned it at your mother’s breasts, how to powder your faces, how to lie, even to yourselves, while truth stalks the dark of your minds like an assassin” (ibid.). All in all, the women leave no doubt that Medea is different and recognize “She’s not, you know, one of us” (ibid.). Moreover, they blame her for bringing this on herself, because they all have been in a similar situation, but got over it and learned to keep an eye on the situation (ibid.: 17ff.), for example by keeping “tabs on his phone” (ibid.). Although they do not see a divorce as an option and are therefore not compassionate, they emphasize the positive side effect of losing weight and call it “the divorce diet” (ibid.: 18). Since the nurse shares the women’s opinion and the cleaner does rather tell her own story instead of replacing a “classical” chorus, the audience’s empathy increases. We are the ones who do not see Medea as the other, but who share her opinion instead. It can also be argued that we adopt her role of the other.

Medea’s arguments with Jason are another method Cusk uses to bring the audience closer to Medea. Jason throws numerous phrases at her, that are typical for divorcing couples. He does not show much emotion and most of his statements stay superficial. Medea’s answers are individual and very emotional, which the audience is likely to relate to. In one argument, for example, she compares him to a dictator, who takes away people’s history (ibid.: 28f.), then she compares his engagement to genocide (ibid.: 30), because it destroys everything, and finally she

calls his requests not even an audacity, but a disease (ibid.: 32), which has been cited from the original version (Vellacott 2004: 151). Cusk explains: “What’s more, she shows emotion: far from putting a brave face on it, she broadcasts both her own pain and the larger injustices of which, as a woman, she has become a victim. She isn’t afraid to say what she feels; indeed, she feels entitled to say it” (Cusk 2015b). On the contrary, Jason does not take the situation seriously: “Look, I’m – ah – not going to be able to pick up the boys after all. I’ve got a – there’s a meeting I just can’t miss and – ah – well, I’m sure they’ll be happy to be with you.” (Cusk 2015a: 45). He also tries to make Medea responsible for her misery, by reminding her of the saying that there “are always, always two sides.” (ibid.: 11). By suggesting “Look, you should be trying to find someone yourself. You’re still an attractive woman.” (ibid.: 94), he insults her without even noticing it. He expresses his selfishness by claiming that he wants to be free again (ibid.: 71), put himself first (ibid.: 96) and focus on his career (ibid.: 94). Thereby, Medea’s anger becomes rational and even appropriate. She is more authentic than Jason and her actions do not appear to be monstrous at all.

Finally, and most obvious, Cusk’s Medea does not directly kill anyone. She does mention that words are powerful and that she will punish Jason with words (ibid.: 56), but as the play is set in our presence and culture and as there are no references suggesting that in the play’s reality supernatural powers exist, the audience does not see Medea as guilty sorceress. Additionally, Medea does not even write the script on her own, but instructs Aegeus to write it in exchange for a novel he needs (most likely because of the privacy clause). In how far her revenge enables the audience to identify with her will be discussed more detailed in the following chapter.

## 5 Medea’s revenge

One thing is her revenge, another is giving the children to their father. Medea does not leave them with him as part of her revenge or to punish him, but as part of gaining equality and fairness. She cannot and does not want to be a mother on her own and since she repeatedly experiences Jason’s disability to take responsibility,

she does not see any other possible way to retrieve the opportunity to live as a writer. Many times, he confronts her with statements such as “I’ve got to work” (Cusk 2015a: 33). Without Jason’s support, she is not able to combine motherhood and her job, which she identifies with even more than with her role as mother. Jason, however, does not notice that double burden:

Jason: How’s the writing going?

Medea: Oh, you know, fine. To be honest there isn’t much time for it, now that I’m a full time mum. (ibid.: 95)

In contrast to Euripides’ version, this Medea feels offended by society’s view that she should and even wants to keep the children. She points out that she does not accept to be with the children on her own:

Jason: [...] I want to be free.

Medea: You can’t be.

Jason: Why not? Why –

Medea: You’re not –

Jason: – not?

Medea: – free. You have two –

Jason: Oh, the children –

Medea: – children. [...]

You can’t just send them –

Jason: Look, I need to put myself –

Medea: – back to the shop.

Jason: – first for –

Medea: I’m not a shop.

Jason: – a while.

Medea: I’m not a shop. (ibid.: 71f.)

In the dialogue, it can be seen that Jason continuously ignores Medea’s warnings. She even threatens him explicitly by reminding him of their past: “I can unmake you the same way I made you” (ibid.: 54). Her motivation to punish him and his fiancée mainly derives from the fact that they both leave Medea alone with the responsibility and what increases her anger is the implicitness, or how Gardner calls it, the “myth” (ibid. 2015) that motherhood is rewarding. In an interview Cusk said that “it absolutely relies on the institutionalised culture of motherhood to mop

up and conceal the essential cynicism of divorce. What happens is: man leaves woman, children are damaged, and woman is expected to continue their lives and her life as a self-sacrificing pretence” (Rustin 2015). In the play, she integrated her view with phrases such as “He changed his mind but they’re still here, occupying space. They are – trash” (Cusk 2015a: 56). One reason for Jason’s ignorance is a “misunderstanding”, because he implies that he gave the children to Medea, because he believes that “you can’t deny a woman the right to her own baby” (ibd.: 94) and admits that the children weren’t “essential for me. Not the way it was for you” (ibd.: 78). There are various voices pointing at the negative aspects of motherhood, for example, the nurse mentions that “as a mother you come last” (ibd.: 9) and the tutor adds “when I was born I broke her insides” (ibd.). However, most women in the play accept their fate and stay silent.

From Cusk’s perspective, it was necessary to modify “the action to make it more comprehensible in the present day” (Rustin 2015). Cusk herself states that in “our world, a play about a mother who kills her children is a different kind of play altogether. That play does not concern itself with the traducing of female equality by bourgeois domestic politics; that play is about psychosis. And Medea is not psychotic – on the contrary, she is an ultimate realist and moralist” (ibd. 2015b). Therefore, Cusk searched for a contemporary female response to injustice, which looks wrong, but can nevertheless morally and intellectually defended as right (ibd.).

The children function mainly as a symbol, although they were given a voice while they were still with their mother. Their suicide attempt may be unrealistic, since children at that age usually do not commit suicide, but this action is of great importance as it symbolizes Jason’s disability to be a careful father on the one hand, and their close relationship to their mother, on the other. Moreover, their probable death underlines the far-reaching consequences of their parent’s divorce and like in the original, they turn out to be the true victims, since they only serve as tools in this play to increase tragic and dismay. In the moment of leaving the children behind (the connotation of “leaving the children with their father” would not fit in this context), Medea consciously accepts any consequences that might occur. However, she does not directly kill her children, what places the responsibility for their destiny to a much greater extent on Jason than in the original play. Medea’s

reluctance concerning the children's fate, as well as not murdering Jason's fiancée, does not lead to a decrease in the revenge she takes on Jason. In fact, it illustrates different values of Cusk's Jason compared to the original. In both plays, Medea aims at hurting Jason where it has the greatest effect. She wants to take what is most important to him. Also, in both plays it is power and the expression of a stereotypical masculinity that Jason strikes for. As mentioned before, at the time of Euripides, having children was a necessity for men, as it assured their future life. Especially having children with the princess would have increased Jason's power and influence. By killing his children and his bride-to-be, Medea castrates Jason, as she takes every chance for him to meet society's expectations regarding his gender.

The Aegeus scene is central in both plays for the success of Medea's revenge. Moreover, it mirrors what is most important to men (Easterling 2003: 193, 195). In the original, Aegeus biggest wish is to have children. Although Cusk's Aegeus talks about having children, too, he visits Medea because he needs her help concerning his career. The first part of their conversation concerning children reminds of a small talk, whereas the second part about his writer's block appears to be very serious. Consequently, the value of children versus career is clearly defined in the society drawn by Cusk. Instead of children, it is personal freedom, self-fulfillment and a career that Jason is after. First, he is about to marry into an influential family and not willing to support Medea. In fact, she even has to leave the house, because Jason needs the money to meet his fiancée's expectations of a generous man. Moreover, his fiancée is significantly younger than Medea. The status and beauty of youth is emphasized numerous times by Jason, Creon and the women. Her youth seems to offer him a life without the duties and responsibilities of his past life as father next to a grown-up woman, who probably challenges him and his status. Jason explains: "At the moment the children are a problem for her. She's just not ready – she's young and she's beautiful and she wants to have fun" (Cusk 2015a: 96). All in all, she promises him the opportunity to climb the social ladder and make his career. It can be stated that it is not her personality or any interests, they have in common, that their relationship is based on. She rather serves as his springboard and is probably presented by him as his conquest, what can be seen in the women's conversations:

W1: She's got the body *and* the connections.

W4: She must wonder if it's her he's after, or – you know? [...]

W1: She's quite young, apparently.

W2: Well that's original. (Cusk 2015a: 15ff.).

As mentioned before, Medea does not kill her children, but instead ruins Jason's and Glauce's life and career by asking Aegeus to write a play about them which finally became reality. She mentioned her idea before, said that she would "make something happen using only words" and called it a "magic trick" (ibd.: 56). Although this sounds supernatural, Medea is at no point characterized as a sorceress or something comparable. This would have impeded the identification with her. Additionally, any glorifying attributes are missing. Compared to Euripides' version, Medea does not use heroic language (Easterling 2003: 196), nor does she triumph over Jason or her "enemies" (ibd.: 197). It was this heroic self-image which made Medea "a far from ordinary" (ibd.) and since Cusk refused to integrate it, she brought Medea nearer to the audience. However, the messenger finally invites the audience to judge: "Call it justice or call it evil, up to you." (Cusk 2015a: 105)

## 6 Conclusion

The original version of *Medea* is about a woman who kills her children after her husband left her for another woman. She seeks for revenge and is driven by anger, which derives, inter alia, from her jealousy. She turns out to be monstrous-feminine and superhuman. She constantly personifies the other and leaves the audience with an ambivalent impression. Cusk's *Medea*, on the other hand, is about a woman who refuses to subordinate herself to motherhood and "who speaks of the exhaustion, the isolation and sheer slog of being a mother, [that] is deemed to be unnatural" (Gardner 2015). Although she is angry, her behavior must be interpreted as a constant defense against injustice and unequal treatment with a minimum of action (especially no physical violence) and a great use of words. Moreover, Cusk's *Medea* acts within a legal framework and stays genuine. She does not just talk about the importance of truth, but also acts it out with all its negative consequences. This honesty cannot be found in the original translation, in which Medea lies to everyone

except the chorus (Easterling 2003: 191). These qualities enable the audience's identification with her instead of the sole pity and understanding brought up for the "original" Medea.

Becoming active, seeking revenge and accepting the drastic consequences without moaning is usually perceived as masculine characteristics. Creed argues that from a misogynistic perspective "femininity is never violent – not even in the imagination" (ibid. 1993: 156) and that "women by definition are 'pure' creatures [...] [who] need men to 'guide' them through life's stormy passage" (ibid.). This view exists in both versions and is attacked by Medea. However, the act of killing the children misses and therefore the role of the audience changes. The audience is no longer just looking at the narrative and enabled to judge in the end, but is meant to identify with Medea and question our (pre-)conception of gender (Cusk 2015b; Rustin 2015). Medea is neither monstrous, nor the Other, she is us and fighting for our justice, too. Cusk mentions that the play "demonstrates, with bitter irony, that a woman is better protected by conventional passivity than by independence and autonomy" (ibid. 2015b), but probably speaks through Medea when she says: "Out of suffering comes truth" (Cusk 2015a: 21) and "I'd rather be dead than unfree" (ibid.). Furthermore, she says that what interested her was "the contemporary struggle to reconcile feminist principles with institutional modes of living" (Cusk 2015b), which Medea has to fight the same way many self-determined women nowadays have to. Unfortunately, the end of the play is as pessimistic and tragic as our reality, 2.500 years after Euripides wrote *Medea*: "nothing, fundamentally, has changed" (ibid.). At least, the intelligent and confident female protagonist is no longer presented as monstrous-feminine.

## 7 References

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