

Dance and Politics in Cultural Spaces: The Modification of Greek Mythology*

Focuses on *Medea*(2007) of Sasha Waltz

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I. Introduction

Myths are archetypes of human life. They describe human emotions such as joy, anger, sorrow, and happiness, and connote the existential agonies and problems of mankind. Myths are not set in stone; over time they are transformed, as all living organisms are transformed. They resemble the stories of our lives, and have been used as motifs in art, appearing as central themes in architecture, sculpture, painting, and dance. At times, they have been modified by artists. Therefore, their interpretation provides a perspective of the ideology of the age, and an encounter with its social and cultural aspects.¹⁾

Medea—a representative tragic female figure in Greek mythology—embodies emotions such as conflict, envy, and revenge that have resulted from a fierce love. She is considered an archetype of the femme fatale for her vicious, cruel, and terrifying character. Various works employ *Medea* as subject matter, starting with *Médée et Jason*, choreographed by Jean-Georges Noverre and performed in 1763, *Medea 2*(2008) by Dimitris Papaioannou, *Medea*(2012) by Julie Bienertova, and *Medea Reloaded*(2014), by Marco Chenevier. Differing from past works, recent performances restore and interpret *Medea* as a contemporary figure by exploring and experimenting with different possibilities,

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1) Taek Su Han(2007), *La Violence dans le mythe et la violence de la femme*, *SCELLF* 25, p.385.

rather than complying with her portrayal in myths.²⁾

This paper proposes the following questions: First, who is Medea? Second, how has Medea been reproduced in works throughout the history of dance? Next, we look at a recent analysis of Medea, and explore the meaning of this myth by interpreting the works of Sasha Waltz. These approaches will allow us to consider various moral issues, and also the significance of myths in contemporary dance. Finally, we investigate the expressions and movements used to represent a new Medea in dance.

II. Understanding the *Medea* Myth

1. Who is Medea?

Many think Medea is a figure from ancient Greek mythology. However, the story of Medea that we know today is actually from a Greek tragedy written by Euripides.³⁾ Euripides⁴⁾ wrote *Medea*, which had been developing over time as a legend, incorporated the local folklore, and translated the tragedy into multiple languages under the title of *The Greek Myth Medea*. Medea also appears in *Theogony*, which was written in the seventh century B.C. by the Greek writer Hesiod. Hesiod briefly mentioned Medea in his description of the genealogy of the gods; in actual content, Medea was introduced as the wife of Jason, consistent with the legend of Argo. However, the Medea described by Euripides in the spring of 431 was a tragic figure, with a far from a happy fate.⁵⁾ Euripides depicted her as a woman who slandered many people, destroyed many lives, and was a cold-blooded mother.⁶⁾ He described her as a foreign woman, who brought bloody violence and curses with her, as a woman who could not

2) Jiwon Lee(2014), The Reproduction and Expression of Medea in Contemporary Dance on Works of Angelin Preljocaj and Dimitris Papaioannou, *Dance Research Journal of Korea* 72(3), p.1.

3) The tragedy is mainly about Jason's heroic feats. Jason builds a giant ship named Argo and sets out on a journey to Colchis with 50 heroes in search of the Golden Fleece. However, Aetes, King of Colchis, tells Jason that he would only give him the Golden Fleece if Jason plowed a field with bulls that breathe fire and then sow the field with dragon's teeth. Medea, princess of the land, helps Jason with the quest. However, Aetes does not keep his promise and Jason gets hold of the Golden Fleece with the help of Medea. While fleeing on the Argo with the Golden Fleece, the crew and Medea kill Medea's brother by tearing him to pieces and tossing his body in the sea in order to distract pursuers. Later, Jason brings the Golden Fleece back to his uncle Pelias, but Pelias tries to kill Jason instead of returning him to his throne. Medea lies to Pelias' two daughters that she would magically restore Pelias to youth if they killed him and poured him into a boiling pot. Medea and Jason end up escaping to Corinth. While having two sons and living in Corinth as fugitives, King Creon suggests Jason that he marry his daughter Glauce. Jason, full of ambition, bans Medea from the country. In this perilous situation, Medea coincidentally meets her friend, Aegeus, King of Athens, and plans revenge in hiding. To seek revenge on Jason who betrayed her, Medea murders the King of Corinth and his daughter Glauce and also kills her own two sons. Then she flies away into the sky on a magic chariot pulled by a snake with wings. Having lost everything, Jason falls into despair.

4) Euripides is regarded a playwright and realist who depicts the human state down-to-earth. (Euripides(2012), *Medea*, Song Ok (trans.)(Seoul: Dongin, 2012), p.15).

5) Euripides(2012). p.12.

6) Young-lan Jang(2001), *Woman in Myth*(Seoul: Munye), p.73.

control her emotions, and a frightening character capable of sorcery.⁷⁾

Medea has been constantly reinterpreted in literature and in the theatre. An epic poem from 300 B.C., *The Voyage of the Argo*, received popular acclaim at the time. In addition, Seneca (BC 4–AD 65) and Pierre Corneille (1604–1684), as well as Russian dramatist Vladislav Ozerov (1770–1816), who was influenced by neoclassicism, also wrote about Medea. When German Romanticism reached its height, Austrian writer Franz Grillparzer dramatized the Medea myth in (The Golden Fleece, 1822), and in the twentieth century, Medea was adapted and interpreted on multiple occasions by Maxwell Anderson (1888–1959), Jean Anouilh (1910–1987), and Robinson Jeffers (1887–1962).⁸⁾ Such rebirths of the myth contributed to its permanency, and played a role in openly sharing and spreading myth as a culture.

2. Medea in the History of Dance

Works that use Medea as their subject matter have appeared throughout history, and Medea has been recreated using various expressions. However, the tendency has been to depict Medea as a femme fatale, or an evil woman, and it is interesting to note that, except in a few cases, male dancers created all the performances. In 1763, Noverre made *Médée et Jason*. The lead female dancer in this work was *Marie Sallé*, who is said to have had exceptional expressive skills. This work reflects the meaning of the ballet d'action advocated by Noverre, and was the first creative ballet piece about Medea in which expressive movement fully appeared.

Martha Graham's *Cave of the Heart* (1947) was also based on the Medea myth.⁹⁾ Samuel Barber composed the music for this performance, Isamu Noguchi designed the piece, and Edythe Gilford created the costumes. As the name of the first performance—*Serpent Heart*—suggests, the solo movement that depicts Medea's envy is truly overwhelming. The disharmony between the dancer's neck and upper body, which is twisted like a snake, projects Medea's distorted rage and pain into the movement. Her long dishevelled hair, coupled with makeup that accentuates a penetrating stare, maximizes her animal instincts and emanates sex appeal. Her provocative eyes underscore her covetousness, and her tight costume—reminiscent of the skin of a snake—emphasizes the provocativeness of her movements. Medea extracts a long strip of red fabric from her chest; it is like blood spurting out of her heart.¹⁰⁾ What is memorable about Martha Graham's work is that Medea's feelings and desires are expressed in movements that are both delicate and sensitive. In Graham's

7) Taek Su Han(2007), p.385.

8) Euripides(2012), p.16.

9) <<http://nycdancestuff.wordpress.com/2012/08/31/medea-the-smuin-ballet-at-the-joyce-theater/August31,2012>>.

10) Jiwon Lee(2004), A Study on the Femme-Fatal Image Shown in Modern Dance of the Early 20th Century, *The Korean Journal of Dance Studies* 14, pp.167-210.

work, Medea's viciousness and intensity are projected through choreography, and it can be seen that Medea's sharp persona has been translated into dynamic energy.

In 1950, Birgit Cullberg also joined in the reinterpretation of *Medea*. Her performance encompasses thirteen piano pieces, including Allegro Barbaro, with music by Bartók-Sandberg.¹¹⁾ While it originated from Euripides' *Medea*, dramatic effects were added. It premiered at Riksteatern Gaevle, Sweden.¹²⁾ After a few adjustments had been made, it was performed again in 1953, and later in 1958, where, upon entering the New York City Ballet's repertory, it has, until recently, had continued performances.¹³⁾

Michael Smuin's 1977 *Medea* premiered at the Joyce Theater in New York. Performed by the San Francisco Ballet, Medea's relentless will for revenge was embodied in movement, and the story of a woman who had to endure criticism was expressed in gestures. The images created by crimson costumes, which were the dramatic expression of Susan Roemer, the lead dancer, and the twisted development and composition of the work were acclaimed.¹⁴⁾

George Aleksidze choreographed the film *Medea* in 1979. The music for this ballet was written by Samuel Barber, and had first been performed for the 1947 *Medea*. The directors were George Aleksidze and Elgudza Zhgenti, and the leading role was played by M. Goderdzishvili. The film, which is sixty-seven minutes long, faithfully replicates the splendid techniques and choreography of Medea's mythical content. The work uses various filming techniques such as montages and close-ups to focus on Medea's changing feelings and conflicts, and portrays her ferocious image by contrasting good and evil using black and white costumes.

John Neumeier presented his version of Medea in 1990. The specific contents of this work are not available, but it was performed by Germany's Stuttgart Ballet Company, and was based on the Medea myth. It was performed at the Württembergischen Staatstheater, Stuttgart, accompanied by music written by Béla Bartók and Johann Sebastian Bach.¹⁵⁾ Italian dancer Sabrina Lenzi, who played Medea, received favourable reviews.¹⁶⁾

Medea (1993, 2008) by the great Greek choreographer Dimitris Papaioannou consists of the surreal display of images, rigid movements, and lyrical music. That time period in Greece was portrayed on stage using various effects and props, and by intensifying symbolism and abstractness. The performance received positive reviews for expressing Medea's perilous and dramatic situation using the forms of animals, and for using static gestures to portray Medea's psychological conflicts. A new

11) <<http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095652513>>.

12) <<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/productions/production/6464>>.

13) Costumes at the premiere were by Lewis Brown and lighting by David Hays, <<http://www.nycballet.com/ballets/m/medea.aspx>>.

14) <<http://nycdancestuff.wordpress.com/2012/08/31/medea-the-smuin-ballet-at-the-joyce-theater>>.

15) <[http://de.cyclopaedia.net/wiki/Medea-\(Ballett\)](http://de.cyclopaedia.net/wiki/Medea-(Ballett))>.

16) <http://www.houstonballet.org/Inside_Houston_Ballet/Artistic_Staff/Sabrina_Lenzi>.

aspect of Medea, one that surpassed the limitations imposed by prejudice and stereotypes, was emphasized.

Recently, Medea has been the theme of various works. Julie Bienertova's *Medea*, Marie Belousova's *Medea*, Renato Zanella's *Medea*, and Teatro Instabile Di Aosta Company's (TIDA) *Medea Reloaded*, by Marco Chenevier, have been uploaded on YouTube. The most recent Medea work was a modern ballet that premiered on 13 March 2014, at the Estonian National Opera, Italy. It was choreographed by Gianluca Schiavoni, with music composed by Igor Stravinsky, and received wide public attention.¹⁷⁾

The movements in the above works commonly emphasized Medea's wickedness and extremeness, and forms or gestures resembling animals, exceptional images and costumes, aggressive movements, and obvious displays accompanied them. There is a strong tendency in dance to express Medea's image as she is portrayed in myth. It is largely choreographers who have reinforced Medea's negative image, and who have assigned evil images to female dancers.

III. The Representation and Modification of Medea Shown in Sasha Waltz' Work.

Before considering the works of Sasha Waltz, understanding Medea as a mythical character will provide criteria for further analysis. Examining how Medea's character was first formed will facilitate approaching the expressions used in dance.

1. Reconsidering Medea

Recent research reveals that Medea was reinvented during the time of Euripides. Her image, which had been formed in the context of a certain social and political atmosphere, became solidified as evil, due to that influence. Medea's character was formed to serve as a political scapegoat in a male-centred history, and to diminish and restrict women.

A. Character Deriving from Political Intentions

Over time, men have intervened in the birth and reinterpretation of Medea. During the Bronze Age, women were at the centre of all myths and worship. The Goddess of the Earth, who was the guardian of richness and life, was the main focus.¹⁸⁾ However, as patriarchal society emerged, traditional matriarchal myths were replaced with patriarchal myths that were about male-oriented labour and

17) Jiwon Lee(2014), pp.1-2.

18) Joseph Campbell(1999), *The Masks of God* Vol. 3, Jung Youngmok(trans.)(Seoul: Kachibooks), p.16.

nature worship. During this process, negative connotations were added to the content and worship expressed in female myths, and heroic and adventurous aspects were emphasized in patriarchal myths.¹⁹⁾ Thus, views of females became unfavourable, and consequently perceptions of women were altered.

Friedrich Engels, who gave a new meaning to the historical function of myth, defined it as ‘an event that occurred during a period of transition in which maternal society, which had no social classes, changed into a patriarchal hierarchical society’.²⁰⁾ Engels viewed myth as a major heritage that allowed the formation of a Greek civilization. However, negative aspects were added, as the prevalent worldview shifted into one that idolized labour performed on Earth and on nature.²¹⁾ Thus, the belief that women were inferior, and that it was natural to derogate women, was formed.

Athens’ tragedies not only reflected the overflowing social and political emotions of the time, but also played a role in forming future public opinions. For example, the kings of all countries, except Athens, had negative characteristics; Jason was a cowardly villain who was disloyal because of his ambitions, and Creon, the king of Corinth, cared only for the happiness of his family and daughter. On the contrary, Aegeus, the king of Athens, was portrayed as a rational and kind-hearted king. He took Medea as his bride, to keep his promise that she would one day have a child. This act underlined his faithfulness.²²⁾

B. Radical Character Imposed with Evil

To this point in time Medea had been defined as an evil woman. That is the nature of the immorality that has been imposed on Medea. An important reason for this depiction was that while men desired her, it was also true that she had extraordinary traits. In the eyes of men, such a woman would definitely have been a frightening and intimidating force. Thus, there would have been the need to ascribe Medea with the characteristics of a woman generally understood to be evil. She was reborn as an abominable, destructive figure, who killed her two sons for revenge. She was depicted as a woman who murdered her own brother and two children—as an extreme character who brought an end to reproduction, the great legacy of women.

This immoral aspect of Medea is the one most emphasized when she is described as an evil woman. However, what Euripides wrote was not true. Previous myths about Medea said that it was the people of Corinth, not Medea, who murdered Medea’s children, whom she had entrusted to safekeeping in a temple, and that the murder was falsely imputed to Medea. Moreover, some documents said that it was

19) Ibid., pp.375-80.

20) Jintae An(2001), *Mythology*(Seoul: Open Books), pp.36-37.

21) SuYeon Lee(2009), The Study on prose 『Medeia and her children』 of L. Ulitskaja, *The Journal of Inter Literature* 27, pp.215-16.

22) Hye Young Choi(2008), The Medea of Euripides and the Peloponnesian War: A Historical Perspective, *Journal of Wester History* 18, pp.1-20.

her husband Jason who killed her half-brother, and not Medea.²³⁾ Therefore, it is likely that Medea's character did not originate from the myth, but was a dramatic character that had been distorted during the period in which it was written.

The fact that Medea was framed with a cruel and evil image reflects the spirit and ethics of the time. In the myth, Medea was actually a courageous woman who saved and protected Jason. She was an active, competent, and determined woman. Looking at these traits from male-centred values, they could lead to conflict or be in opposition with the male ideal, and result in overturning society.²⁴⁾ Therefore, Medea's distorted entry had to include a negative account of her morality or ethicality, an issue on which everyone could agree. An evil character would undoubtedly gain the sympathy of many people, while transcending time and space.

2. The Meaning of Medea in the Works of Sasha Waltz

Germany's modern dance company *Sasha Waltz and Guests* celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2013. It has travelled to, and performed in, 127 cities in fifty-one countries.²⁵⁾ Recently, the company has begun pursuing a new genre that emphasizes a combination of opera, music, and movement. This trend, in which vocals, movement, and music come together on stage as equal elements, is called a choreographic opera. The company's first work was the opera *Dido and Aeneas* by Henry Purcell, performed in 2005. It was subsequently performed in fifteen countries, and a DVD recording of this performance received positive reviews. The vignette called *An Aquarium on Stage*, in which men and women dance inside a large glass tank filled with water, was considered the best part of the opera. Waltz's various attempts imply diversity and reformation, and that is why members of her dance company are referred to as cultural ambassadors in all of Europe.

The dance opera *Medea* first performed in 2007 was a choreographic opera work. After premiering on 23 May at the Grand Theatre de Luxembourg, the company was invited to perform at distinguished art festivals all over the world, including Australia in 2009. Heiner Muller wrote the lyrics, and the French composer Pascal Dusapin composed the music. Members of the dance company recall that the time they spent at the Pergamon Museum in Germany played an important role in conceiving this piece.²⁶⁾

In *Medea*, Sasha Waltz interprets the myth from different angles, as compared to previous works.

23) Taewon Yun(2009), Die Schaffung und Variation des Mythos bei Medea: Eine Betrachtung über die Möglichkeit der Herstellung von Kulturgütern, *Hesse* 21, p.51.

24) There is an epic poem by Apollonius written around 220 B.C. It writes about Jason's journey in which he boards the Argo with about 50 other men, including Hercules, to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece. The poem illustrates in detail how Medea helped Jason. (Ilkwon Yunvand Wonik Kim(2004), *Greek Myth and Western Culture*(Seoul: Munye), p.301).

25) <<http://www.dw.de/sasha-waltzs-dance-company-celebrates-20-years/g-17307487>>.

26) <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/artworks/sasha-waltz-medea-and-korper/3086892>>.

Waltz focuses on Medea's character, while presenting space, movement, and mood, which allows for a multi-faceted interpretation of Medea. The work can be examined from two aspects: first, the movement of group dance, and second, the refusal to interpret women in a unitary and biased way.

A. Various Aspects that Appear in the Movement of Group Dancers

Group dancers and the meanings they convey stand out prominently in this work. Group dance provides various meanings through the performance, and allows the era, myth, and audience to meet. A chorus originally refers to a group of performers who sing and dance in the style of traditional Greek theatre. It is interesting to note that a chorus of fifteen women from Corinth appears in Euripides' work, and that this performance too, has a chorus appearing on stage. It is significant that the group dancers participate actively in the development of the story. The connections between the dancers' momentary periods of stillness and their subsequent movements resemble the images on a Greek flower vase. The group dancers' active gestures contribute to the play's development, but also break up the plot, thereby giving the audience a multi-faceted impression. The same applies to changes in feelings or expressions. The strife between men and the fury in their beating hearts is imbedded in the group dancers' powerful gestures. Instead of relying on stage effects or props, Sasha Waltz puts an emphasis on conveying human nature through the dancers' movements.

The group dance is significant, because the story of Medea is not interpreted as an individual's problem, but rather as a problem shared by all people that characterizes the troubles of this generation. The poses and lines of the dance tell a story, but it is not linear, and it is delivered to the audience in the form of a poetic expression or a puzzle. As the movements from every moment accumulate to become a whole gesture, the Medea we know is defined through a gradual process, generation after generation. In contrast to most other works of dance that provide a biased view or interpretation of Medea, Waltz's work depicts Medea's situation and environment with the movement of group dancers. In consideration of the notion that an individual's life journey cannot be taken out of context from his or her environment, the work calls attention to the circumstances in play during Medea's lifetime, and sheds new light on her.

In this way, the group dancers embody various meanings. They play the roles of the people living in the time period, people who have neighbours, who gossip, and who have emotions. They represent Medea's pain, the pioneer route taken by Jason, and nature that looks with idle indifference at the death of the princess of Corinth; they also reflect the cry of the heart in turmoil and conflict inside Medea. They are the energy that travels from one mind to another, and the conditions that influence Medea's choices and possibilities.²⁷⁾

27) <http://www.opera-lille.fr/en/saison-09-10/bdd/cat/opera/sid/99177_medea>.

B. The Femininity of Medea Created by a Woman Choreographer

This work was choreographed by a woman, Sasha Waltz. There is a difference in this performance from the previous performances of Medea which were mostly devised by men. There was, of course, a performance by Martha Graham that was mentioned earlier, but in Graham's work Medea is emphasized as an extreme character, a femme fatale. At the same time, Medea's movements and expressions are in contrast with those of Glauce, exemplifying that women are portrayed with bipolar characteristics of femme fatale and femme fragile, which have historically been defined by men.

In her work, Sasha Waltz applies multilayered characteristics to Medea, rather than single aspects. Medea is portrayed as a mother, warrior, destroyer, and an afflicted being. The significance of Waltz's work lies in her dismantling of the biased and previously persistent image of Medea. Medea is not a crazy monster full of desire, and here the human side of Medea is depicted from various aspects.

Dancers perform the same movements that Medea, danced by Caroline Stein, performs, or they perform different movements simultaneously, as if each person were Medea. The dancers' forms are not eccentric, like the Medea of myth, whereas in Martha Graham and Dimitris Papaioannou's works Medea is distinguished from others by assuming animal forms. This implies that anyone can be Medea. The various aspects of Medea have been transformed into us—Medea is not a strange protagonist of myth, but rather, anyone can be Medea, depending on the situation and the environment. Medea is not looked upon and isolated as a complete alien; instead, she is presented in such a way that the audience can share a psychological homogeneity with her through her movements. This deviates from the repetitive representation of the myth, defies fixation and dichotomy, and is a reinterpretation of Jacques Derrida's gap. By attempting to portray change, instead of repeating a fixed image, Waltz reveals women's variety and significance.

A scene is performed onstage in which Stein hangs onto men, and, owing to their support dances in circles, while drawing circles on the floor with chalk. This movement seems to criticize the fact that Medea's characteristics do not change over time. Medea repeatedly appears as a wicked woman, due to the fact that men emphasize her wicked image. This performance is a rebellion against the fossilization and simplification of Medea as a sorceress.

Therefore, the work of Sasha Waltz uncovers a former image of Medea. It leads the audience to have a new understanding of Medea, as a product of the time period in which she lived, or her environment, and rejects previous interpretations. In some ways, the movements connote that Medea was a woman sacrificed by collective violence. Waltz's *Medea* portrays a flexible understanding of the myth, of women in creative artwork, and exemplifies the possibility that a new Medea can be created.

IV. Conclusion

Euripides's *Medea* is representative of an ancient tragic myth that portrays Medea as a typical symbol of a wicked woman's rage and revenge. Such a Medea is the subject matter and theme that has been reproduced and repeated by many writers and dancers, and contributes to reproducing the femme fatale image of women.

However, *Medea* (2007) by the famous choreographer Sasha Waltz transforms the image of Medea using the contemporary imagination to see her not as a mythical character, but by attempting to transform the theme, motif, and content in the subject matter. Waltz deconstructs the flow of the plot and creates a schematized hierarchical structure with the movements of group dancers. She breaks away from the story's structure, by asserting that what is considered to be the core incident is to be studied from an overall perspective, and delivers her understanding of Medea in fragments. Interesting differences include the timing of incidents, character designs, movement narrations, and discontinuities of space.

Sasha Waltz's work adds contemporary meaning to Medea by applying a broad perspective and interpretation, instead of relying on memories. Reflecting on the past in a new era and environment, Waltz has put her focus on Medea's identity as a woman. Along with the perspective afforded by history, she has provided an opportunity for considering various approaches for defining and discussing mythical figures. I hope that this research will serve as useful material for future research of the works of choreographers and the interpretation of myth.

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문화적 공간에서의 춤과 정치: 그리스 신화의 변주

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본 연구는 그리스 신화가 어떻게 이 시대의 이야기로 새롭게 복원되어 무대화되었는지 살피고 있다. 문화적 공간에서 발하는 신화에 관한 정치적 논의는 최근 컨템포러리 작가들의 현대적 상상력과 몸의 이미지를 통해 해체되고 붕괴되었다. 특별히 샤샤 발츠는 작품 「메데아」(2007)를 통해 독특한 움직임 화법과 플랏의 상징적 구성, 그리고 공간과 사건의 파편화된 해석으로 새로움을 더하였다. 본 연구가 차후 컨템포러리 무용작가들의 작품을 연구하고 신화를 해석하는데 있어 유용한 자료로 활용되길 기대한다.

키워드: 메데아 (Medea), 샤샤발츠 (Sasha Waltz), 팜므 파탈 (Femme fatale), 그리스 신화 (Greek Myth), 컨템포러리 댄스 (Contemporary Dance)