
THE MUSIC AND 'MADNESS' OF MEDEA: WRITING AND LISTENING ASSIGNMENT

Vivian E. Deno, Butler University

INTRODUCTORY ESSAY

"Mad Women: Film, Fiction, and History" is a second-year course that traditionally draws a wide audience of students, many coming from History, English, Political Science, and Gender, Women, & Sexuality Studies. The course is part of the university's core curriculum and fulfills our Text and Ideas requirement, which asks students "to engage in reading, writing, and discussion about important ideas drawn from the study of important texts in a variety of areas, including among others, literary texts, dramatic texts, sacred texts, historical texts, philosophical texts, and scientific texts."¹ In this course, we examine iterations of female madness—the hysteric, the scorned woman, the political firebrand, the sexual rebel, etc.—to better understand the real and imagined female experiences. In the Liberal Arts statement for the course, I draw from French feminist Simone de Beauvoir to frame the course as engaging in an analysis of the poetics of woman. In "The Second Sex," de Beauvoir argued that "no biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature...."² In unraveling this poesis or process of creation, we pay particular attention to the ways in which various iterations of the mad woman have been created under historically and culturally distinct moments and gender regimes. We also seek out the faint traces of the old images and ideas that always haunt and inform the new.

The class starts with a consideration of iconic women, wending its way from ancient Greece to the American borderlands: Medea, Klytemnestra, Antigone, Lilith and Eve, La Malinche, and La Llorona. We begin the course with a reading of Kathleen Komar's introduction to her work *Reclaiming Klytemnestra: Revenge or Reconciliation* (2003). Drawing on Adrienne Rich, Komar delineates a feminist need to, and history of, reimagining iconic depictions of women. Komar argues that, "modern women must constantly scrutinize the dominant patriarchal images that set the patterns of their existence.... To do this, they must engage those texts that form the roots of the tradition that excludes them." Crafting novel versions, offering new interpretations of these and other icons of female madness, helps students to construct new and potentially more expansive explanatory models of the experience of women. Moreover, as Komar claims, "creating a revisionary text is akin to teaching a foreign language. Not until we learn another language does it occur to us that our own is not really a transparent window on the world, a god-given and accurate medium for the understanding of our surroundings," and I would add our histories and lived

¹ Butler University, "Core Curriculum: Text and Ideas," <https://www.butler.edu/core/texts-ideas> (accessed 1 October 2017).

² The Liberal Arts Statement was a syllabus requirement instituted by a previous college dean. It was designed to have faculty situate their courses within the intellectual traditions of the Liberal Arts for their students. I keep it for this course as it gives the students a sense of the course purpose that goes beyond a mere description. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (NY: Vintage Books, 1974), 301.

experiences.³ Thus, the acts of reiteration and revision are central to the course.⁴ This assignment focuses on the use of music as an adaptive and reflective practice that asks students to work through the emotional landscape of fictional and historical actors. It suggests connections between Medea and the contemporary moment in depictions of motherhood, abortion, mental illness, legal residency status, etc.

This low stakes assignment comes early in the semester as we transition from Euripides' *Medea* to that of Seneca. As she travelled from Greece to Rome, Medea underwent a striking transformation through Seneca's reinterpretation of Medea as a woman beyond the pale, a barbarian consumed by her lust-driven anger to extraordinary acts of filicide.⁵ I have the student's pause and solicit them to 'hear' Euripides' Medea and then connect this ancient text to their contemporary musical and social landscape. Music serves here as an expressive and interpretive bridge helping students to make sense of a text and personae that they might have reservations understanding. Students are required to select a moment in the text—scene, dialogue, mood, character motivation—and connect it with a contemporary song of their selection. This helps to reinforce critical reading skills that we develop in the course through collaboratively annotating difficult readings.⁶ We then develop a crowd-sourced playlist, which is shared through a class playlist on Youtube, Spotify, or some other music sharing service.⁷ Sharing the playlist in advance of class discussion allows students to familiarize themselves with each other's interpretive ownership of the shared text. The collaboratively created playlist offers a window into how the students are processing the information and an opportunity to look for interpretive gaps in their understanding.

³ Adrienne Rich defines "...re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction." See, Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," *College English* 34 (October 1972): 18 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/375215> (accessed 1 October 2017) and Kathleen Komar, *Reclaiming Klytemnestra: Revenge or Reconciliation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 15 and 3. Betine van Zyl Smit has explored Medea as a feminist muse and the various feminist reinterpretations of the play. See, Betine van Zyl Smit, "Medea the Feminist," *Acta Classica*, 45 (2002): 101-122, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24595328> (accessed 1 October 2017).

⁴ The final course assignment requires students to creatively reimagine and present an iconic woman. Once again, they are asked to consider textual moments and tone and to rethink relationships. This reinforces our earlier course assignment creating a Medea playlist and our reading of Komar. Students have tackled a variety of complicated figures using creative means to reimagine the possibilities of 'mad women'. Some have recast the relationship between Eve and Lilith drawing inspiration from Judith Plaskow's work "The Coming of Lilith," <https://jwa.org/media/coming-of-lilith-by-judith-plaskow> (accessed 1 October 2017). Others have sought to better understand the evolution of psychiatric pronunciations of female madness and have reinterpreted Sylvia Plath's works or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" for a contemporary audience. Other students have offered new narrative approaches to Rosa Parks, Emma Goldman, and other central figures in the course.

⁵ Seneca's reformulation of Medea emphasizes her "anger, rage, violence, force, her barbarity, animality, 'otherness'," particularity in the final choral ode (lines 849-878), with descriptions of her 'dashing' around "like a tigress" "pacing furiously," "Medea cannot rein her anger or her love" which results in her gruesome acts of killing her sons atop her roof as Jason watches from the streets below. See A.J. Boyle, "Introduction," in *Medea: Seneca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), xii-cl, lxxxiii.

⁶ Early in the course we read Sophocles' *Antigone* and a selection from Judith Butler's provocative engagement with the play, *Antigone's Claim* (2000). This is a challenging but rewarding moment that lends itself to being an object lesson in how to read difficult texts. Having already planted the seed of a collaborative interpretive community through this earlier playlist assignment, there is a foundation of trust and confidence that helps the class to collectively annotate our selection of Butler's writing. See Judith Butler, "Promiscuous Obedience," in *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 57-98.

⁷ One problem that I have run into with the assignment is the shifting marketplace of social media platforms. I used Playlist.com several times but had to switch as the platform encountered legal problems with copyright holders. It is now defunct and earlier playlists are no longer available for current courses. This undermines the connection between successive classes. For the last iteration of the playlist, see IndyViv, "Medea 2016," https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnsWfbXuYQ8E_M7dilwginHrlcsf7Mpxz (accessed 1 October 2017).

Students are questioned at the start of the class about their choices and those of their classmates to assess their familiarity with the playlist.⁸

TOOLBOX: THE MUSIC AND 'MADNESS' OF MEDEA: A WRITING AND LISTENING ASSIGNMENT

THINKING ASSIGNMENT

Select one song to capture a textual moment in Euripides' *Medea*. Your song choice may align itself with a particular moment in the play, line spoken about or by Medea. It may also capture the mood or tone of a particular moment of the play. Once you have selected your title share it with me, and I will create and share a class playlist.

LISTENING ASSIGNMENT

Once the playlist is available, spend time listening to it. Think about the textual moments invoked by your song choice and those of your classmates.⁹ Are there any surprising choices? Can you hear Medea in the songs selected? Does a new version of Medea emerge as a result of the playlist?

WRITING ASSIGNMENT

What song did you choose? Why? Using the text, support your choice. Be careful to show your close reading of the play and your understanding of Medea as a character or person—how she thinks, how she reasons, what she feels, and how she moves through the world. At what moment in the play would your music be heard? Would it be background music, a snippet, or a central dramatic element moving the character/plot forward? Think about how the music might establish or reflect her relationship with others?

- a. After some reflection and listening to the song choices of your classmates: Do you have any regrets in your song choice? Why/why not?
- b. Bonus level of difficulty: Can you bring Komar in here either directly or in a meta or overarching way? Does your choice of the song reflect an alternative, re-visioning of Medea in some way?

PARTICULARS

- About 500-750 words. 1.5 spaces, 1-inch margins, 12-point font—Times Roman, no Helvetica. Tight, single-spaced headings. Do not fluff these requirements. "Fluffing" of the basic formatting is a red flag, and is a bad way to begin with a relationship with your professor and your course work.
- Use the spell check and the grammar check as a first step in your drafting process.

⁸ This could be more formalized with a quiz, but thus far courses have been sufficiently small enough and lively to not warrant this additional step.

⁹ In general, I do not provide students with an index of lines associated with the song selection and/or the name of the student who has selected a particular song in advance of class. Part of the experience of the assignment, is getting to know one another. Students attempt to discern musical tastes of one another and are sometimes quite surprised by how songs match up with their peers. This works as a second pass at a class ice-breaker as students get to know one another through their music.

- MLA is fine here with a little modification. I would like to have the play line you are citing as well as the page. So, the citation should look something like this: Author Line/page or (Euripides 1500/93).
- Be sure to keep reading notes and writing drafts to help us discuss your reading and writing process.

The write-ups will be evaluated based on the adherence to the above basic formatting, your careful critical reading of the play, and the argumentative connections made between your song selection and your understanding and interpretation of the play. You will want to be careful not to offer summary of the play and will want to demonstrate a critical engagement with *Medea*. Before writing be sure that you understand the setting and context of the play, as well as the major themes. Be sure to consult with the translator's notes in our book.¹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

In terms of process, students must support their choices in a short writing assignment and in class discussions which tend to span several sessions over the semester as the students return to the specter of Medea.¹¹ In general, as a first assignment I keep it low stakes in terms of points value and structure. My assessment responses tend to be more diagnostic than prognostic. The written portion of the assignment is a small write-up that has students articulate lyrics, tone, view point with moments and lines in the play. Corrections to the mechanics of their writing do not figure into the assessment score. Instead, the grade is weighted to conformity to the assignment requirements, nuance of song selection, and deeper understanding of the play demonstrated both in their writing and in class-discussion. I listen to their in-class discussion of their own song selection and that of their peers, and provide both in the moment feedback and written feedback on their papers. This assignment resonates with students and plays out across the semester as the song list is referenced and discussed in relation to other readings and topics throughout the course.¹²

Thematically, the playlist helps to guide not only discussions of Medea but also orients our future encounters with other Medeas, women whose relationship to motherhood is ambivalent and/or fraught. Along with the introduction to *Reclaiming Klytemnestra*, students watch Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, "The Danger of a Single Story" (2016) which works to fracture their understanding of history and experience as singular.¹³ Thus hearing fifteen different takes on Euripede's Medea helps them to think about the perspectives and histories that they might not have considered in their initial readings of the text. The

¹⁰ John Harrison, *Euripides: Medea*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹¹ Later we read selections about Margaret Garner and her escape from slavery and her filicide and screen the film, *Beloved* (1998) which is loosely based on Garner's life. We will also encounter expressions of maternal ambivalence in the writings of the poet Anne Sexton and in the documentary "Means of Grace" (1996). See, Veta Smith Tucker, "Secret Agents: Black Women Insurgents on Abolitionist Battlegrounds," in *Gendered Resistance: Women, Slavery, and the Legacy of Margaret Garner*, eds. Mary Frederickson and Delores Walters, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 77-98 and Linda Gray Sexton, "Searching for Mercy Street" in *Out of Her Mind: Women Writing on Madness*, ed. Rebecca Shannonhouse, (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 120-129.

¹² During our discussions of the playlist, students often offer insight into how their song selection reflects an enduring quality of the Medea myth, particularly the scorned woman angle.

¹³ Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, "The Danger of a Single Story" https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story (accessed 1 October 2017).

assignment encourages students to take ownership of the material by having a direct impact on the sources they will engage with (via their song selection), and it encourages them to 'hear' and contemplate intellectual connections across the span of the semester. It does not always 'work' as planned with students selecting transparently on-point songs. There are sometimes songs that are more reflective of Jason's vantage point or suggest a cursory reading of the play. This is an opportunity for us to discuss how a student was 'hearing' the reading and interpreting *Medea*, and to redirect them to the text for a more critical engagement. Significantly, this 'straying' frequently opens up new possibilities for discussion. This can invite re-reading and analytical fine tuning of the course material. It can also stretch and challenge how we might collectively envision Medea as student interests and contemporary issues in US history influence our encounters with other Medeas in the course. Several recent events in the state involving the prosecution of desperate immigrant women for self-induced abortions and suicide attempts have impacted classroom discussions of *Medea*.¹⁴

¹⁴ In 2009, the Indiana legislature passed a statute authorizing a sentencing enhancement if the State "can show beyond a reasonable doubt that the person, while committing or attempting to commit murder... caused the termination of a human pregnancy." The law was passed in the aftermath of a bank robbery that resulted in the death of twin fetuses. The following year, Chinese immigrant Bei Bei Shuai would become the first person charged and convicted under the new guidelines after her suicide attempt resulted in the premature delivery and death of her daughter. A year later, Purvi Patel, the daughter of South Asian immigrants, was charged with both self-induced abortion and feticide after a pre-term birth at twenty-five weeks. Patel was convicted and sentenced to twenty years and Shuai to forty-one years. Both were eventually freed upon appeal. In class discussions, these two cases help to concretize issues raised in our earlier explorations of Medea and Margaret Garner. Additionally, these recent high-profile cases underscore the particular plight of 'outsider' women, women who are marked as other because of race, ethnicity, social or immigration status, etc. As Kate Manne has noted, Indiana's Asian and Asian American population is less than 2 percent of the state's total, and the prosecution of Shuai and Patel may reflect their "vulnerab[ility]... to undue suspicion based on stereotypes regarding—ironically—the devaluation of girls and women, and the practice of sex-selective abortion in their countries of familial [and personal] origin..." The *Guardian's* coverage of Bei Bei Shuai's case provides a critical connection between Medea and Shuai, and one of the play's undercurrents, the anger and desperation of a 'foreign' woman. Writing from Indianapolis, Ed Plinkgtton noted that Shuai attempted suicide which resulted in a premature delivery and death of Shuai's daughter, after Shuai was abandoned by her married lover. See, Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 94-97; Deepa Iyer and Miriam Yeung, "Purvi Patel Isn't the First Woman of Color to Have Her Pregnancy Put on Trial in Indiana," 2 February 2015, *Rewire*, <https://rewire.news/article/2015/02/02/purvi-patel-isnt-first-woman-color-pregnancy-put-trial-indiana/> (accessed 1 October 2017); and Ed Plinkgtton, "Indiana Prosecuting Chinese Woman for Suicide Attempt that Killed Her Foetus," *The Guardian* 30 May 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/30/indiana-prosecuting-chinese-woman-suicide-foetus> (accessed, 1 October 2017); van Zyl Smit has argued that "Medea can be made to represent not only betrayed women, but also oppressed racial groups, exploited colonials, and women." van Zyl Smit, "Medea the Feminist," 102. For a general background of the Patel case, see, Jennifer Chowdhury, "Indiana Sentences Purvi Patel to 20 Years for Feticide," 3 March 2015, NBC News, <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/indiana-has-now-charged-two-asian-american-women-feticide-n332761> (accessed 17 February 2017) and Rajani Bhatia, "A Reproductive Justice Perspective on the Purvi Patel Case," *Indian Journal of Medical Ethics* 19 May 2016, <http://www.issuesinmedicaethics.org/articles/a-reproductive-justice-perspective-on-the-purvi-patel-case/?galley=print>. For analysis of media coverage of feticide and filicide, see, Lawrence Nelson, "A Crisis For Women's Rights? Surveying Feticide Statutes For Content, Coverage, and Constitutionality," *University of Denver Criminal Law Review* 63 (Winter 2016) and Barbara Barnett, "Medea in the Media: Narrative and Myth in Newspaper Coverage of Women Who Kill Their Children," *Journalism* 7(4) 2006: 411-431; <http://codes.findlaw.com/in/title-35-criminal-law-and-procedure/in-code-sect-35-50-2-16.html> (accessed 1 October 2017).