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Seeking a Voice: Maternal Discourse in the Medea Legend

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"To discover the intonations, scansions, and jubilant rhythms preceding the signifier's position as language's position is to discover the voiced breath that fastens us to an undifferentiated mother, to a mother who later, at the mirror stage, is altered into a maternal language. It is also to grasp this maternal language as well as to be free of it thanks to the subsequently rediscovered mother, who is at a stroke . . . pierced, stripped, signified, castrated, and carried away into the symbolic."

- Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language*, 195

"But we women -- I won't say we are bad by nature, but we are what we are."

- Euripides' Medea
Julia Kristeva asserts, in *Stabat Mater*, that in today's society we are inadequately equipped to speak about motherhood; motherhood defies language, and refuses to conform to its structures. She writes of "a motherhood that today remains . . . without a discourse" (262). Not that we *don't* talk about the mother, for the issue of motherhood pervades academic discourse and popular culture alike. In literary criticism particularly, the past decade or so has brought a wave of motherhood debates, and has raised serious issues of motherhood and society, work, marriage and selfhood. We obviously *can* talk about motherhood and the maternal.

But not completely and correctly, argues Kristeva in *Stabat Mater*. Our discourse cannot encompass the full scope of motherhood. Kristeva maintains that this lacking can be observed partly in the historical evolution of perceptions of motherhood, with the Virgin Mary as a prime example. She traces the development of the virginal institution, and how it has grown to encompass all of femininity. As Mary's importance within the Catholic church grew, perceptions of her expanded impressively. From the few writings about this obscure woman, sprung "a compelling imaginary construct" (*SM* 238). Mary is today a virgin queen who never experienced death and who has come to serve as the ultimate archetype for the love relationship.

This image of Mary which has expanded to encompass so much is nevertheless not sufficient to address several crucial aspects of motherhood. The deficiency of this archetypal figure "doubtless weighs first on the maternal body" (*SM* 259). Because Mary is
stripped of both sex and death, her role as a model ignores the physical aspects of motherhood. She cannot truly serve as a reference for mothers who deal with sex, pregnancy, childbirth, and who continually experience bodily pain. The virginal myth also disregards the relationship between women, and in particular the mother-daughter relationship. Thus, the construct that now looms largely over motherhood and shapes our perceptions of it exemplifies how our ideals for motherhood leave certain crucial areas unexamined.

However, this virginal phenomenon is limited to Western societies, and Catholic cultures in particular; the evolution of the virginal construct is only one restricted example of our lack of a discourse of maternality. This lack in fact has its roots in the universalities of infantile development. In the sections of *Stabat Mater* which do not deal with the virgin mother, the bold text which interrupts the more traditional writing, Kristeva writes of the sensations of motherhood and her own experiences as a mother. The style markedly differs from the more analytical sections. For example, the first bold section begins, "FLASH--instant of time or of dream without time; inordinately swollen atoms of a bond, a vision, a shiver" (234). In using this less analytical, more sensational, personal style, Kristeva illustrates another facet of motherhood that cannot be addressed through formal, analytical prose--the place of the maternal and the relationship with the mother outside of language.

Much of this bold text deals with the mother-child bond, both Kristeva's relationship with her son and her memories of her own
mother. She describes how this bond surpasses language, and makes up for weaknesses within language. "Belief in the mother," she writes, "... is fascinated with a weakness--the weakness of language" (SM 251). The bond with the mother has its origins before the infant begins speaking or has any knowledge of language, and therefore can exist without it. This period prior to language, Kristeva's semiotic stage, as I will discuss later, is the primary factor in the unspeakability of motherhood and the difficulties we face in expressing it completely.

While the inexpressibility of the semiotic and the importance of Mary as the model for motherhood have left us without an appropriate discourse for motherhood, Kristeva does not dismiss this lack of discourse as inevitably certain. She concludes Stabat Mater with a call for a new ethics, "an ethics for this 'second' sex which, as one asserts it, is reawakening" (263). How this new ethics is to be achieved is unclear, although she does provide several particulars. This is not a traditional ethical system, but one which is formed with the contributions of women, and which will eventually confront "the embarrassing and inevitable problematics of the law [by] giving it flesh, language, and jouissance" (262). This new ethics defies morality, is an heretical ethics, an hérétique.

The search for a new ethics can lead in many directions, but one compelling possibility is a study of motherhood through either historical or mythical figures. One such example which opens up many fascinating avenues of discussion is the story of Medea, whose most famous representation is Euripides' drama. The Medea legend and an examination of the varying ways in which it has been
presented shed light on this insufficiency in motherhood discourse. Since the time when Euripides chose to use her story and depict her as a child-killer, her tale has been revised and reworked again and again, in countless languages and genres. The story is an intriguing, yet appalling one, of a woman betrayed who enacts her revenge through the murder of her own two sons. This portrait of extreme motherhood, because it has endured so long and been represented in so many ways, allows an examination of the difficulty in speaking of motherhood that Kristeva points out, and also allows further understanding of how her "herethics" is to be brought about.

I. The Maternal Semiotic in Kristeva

Freud and Motherhood

In studying how a new way of approaching motherhood might be possible, the semiotic, as Kristeva outlines it, is a key element, for it is the main seemingly inherent reason for the unspeakability of motherhood. While it is essentially impossible to describe the semiotic, or to express it through discourse, an understanding of it is necessary, so we are forced into what will inevitably be an inadequate attempt to pin it down, force it into linguistic constructs into which it was not meant to fit.

Kristeva develops her theories of the semiotic and symbolic primarily in Revolution in Poetic Language, and puts this theory into practice in Stabat Mater. Here and in other works, Kristeva challenges Freud's theories, particularly as they relate to motherhood and femininity. In doing so she takes on Freud in a manner
significantly different from many of her feminist peers. Freud's critics assert that he not only shortchanges the female infant, but the mother as well, in choosing the Oedipus tale as his central analogy. He focuses only on infantile development, and never truly considers the long-term effects of his theories and how they are manifested in adult life. As Nancy Chodorow points out in "Freud on Women," Freud never overcame an inability to identify with the mother. Throughout Freud's work, she says, "the maternal, as a strong, intense feeling, preoccupation, and identity in women as subjects is almost entirely absent, along with adequate recognition or treatment of infantile attachment to the mother" (225). This deficiency has been dealt with in several manners.

One response is to rewrite Sophocles' Oedipus narrative, adding a feminist twist that balances Freud's masculine reading. Muriel Rukeyser, in her poem "Myth," adds to the ending of the story, bringing back the female Sphinx, who had been buried by Sophocles and ignored by Freud. The Sphinx refuses to be included under the category of "Man," and "asserts the particularity of women" (in Hirsch 2). The Oedipus story has also been reworked by Hélène Cixous and very recently by Toni Morrison in Beloved. This process of revision has itself however, been questioned. Marianne Hirsch suggests the need to "evaluate the process of revision and to determine whether and to what extent a mere repetition and reproduction of classic conceptions can indeed be transcended" (5).¹ A new method of

¹Hirsch uses the example of Hélène Cixous' play Le Nom d'Oedipe: chant du corps interdit. Here Cixous rewrites the Oedipus story, bringing out Jocasta's voice more fully. This revision, however, does not allow Jocasta to fully emerge; she is seen only in the role of a lover, not that of a mother or woman. Because the original text is so binding, one cannot avoid its boundaries, Hirsch
theoretical inquiry is perhaps now in demand.

Following such a demand, much recent motherhood discourse involves finding new models for motherhood, rather than altering a male centered narrative to fit women. Demeter and Persephone, for example, provide an allegory which centers on the mother's losses and emotions rather than focusing on the male. The story justifies otherwise unacceptable emotions; it "grants legitimacy to the mother's feelings of bereavement, anger, and wild desire, even as it insists on the inevitability and the necessity of separation" (Hirsch 5). Also, this narrative acknowledges that attachment to the mother is often carried over beyond the Oedipal stage. Freud on the other hand, not only insists on the necessity of this separation, but denies any sense of intimacy (at least for the daughter) after it has occurred (Freud 322).²

**The Semiotic in Kristeva**

All of these varied methods of approaching motherhood highlight a significant dilemma in psychoanalytic theory -- how can we honestly profess to go beyond or abandon Freud's theories when they are in actuality solidly positioned in our ways of thinking? He has had such a profound influence that the possibility of creating a theory not rooted in Freud is unimaginable. Julia Kristeva acknowledges this as she develops her psychoanalytic theories. Rather than alleging to have a better model or a complete revision of

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²Freud, in "Female Sexuality," describes how "During the phase of the normal Oedipus complex we find the child tenderly attached to the parent of the opposite sex, while its relation to the parent of its own sex is predominantly hostile" (Freud 322). This hostility is presumably never completely overcome.
Freud, she deliberately and carefully works within the framework of his models of early development.

In attempting to create space for the female and the mother within development theories she chooses neither a revision of the Oedipus story nor an alternate narrative. She bypasses the analogies altogether, and deals directly with the earliest stages of infantile development. She rethinks early development, positing a new stage, the "semiotic" before the infant acquires language and before the Oedipal stage. In so doing, Kristeva does not abandon the elements of Freudian thought which are so pervasive that we instinctively rely on them; the Oedipal stage and castration, for instance, still figure prominently in Kristeva's writings. Kristeva's crucial move is to theorize this new stage, and in doing so, to open up the space to discuss motherhood (and other crucial issues) in many situations where Freud was obviously too restrictive.

While the semiotic in Kristeva is not limited to motherhood, it affects motherhood significantly, and particularly the issues of a motherhood discourse. Most importantly, the semiotic stage occurs before the developing subject enters into language, or the realm of the symbolic. Because of this anteriority to language, exact expression of the semiotic chora\(^3\) is virtually impossible; any attempt to pin it down with words is insufficient. In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva describes the chora as:

> a modality of *significance* in which the linguistic sign is not

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\(^3\)The Greek word *chora*, literally meaning womb, is taken from Plato's *Timeus*, where the definition is "Space, which is everlasting, not admitting destruction; providing a situation for all things that come into being but itself apprehended without the senses by a sort of bastard reasoning, and hardly an object of relief" (in *Revolution*, 124n).
yet articulated as the absence of an object and as the
distinction between real and symbolic. (94)
The absence of language within the semiotic perpetuates as well the
absence of any separation or splitting. The concept of separation is
introduced spatially in the mirror stage and then augmented with
language, in the sign/object split, but at this point there is no
separation between self and other or between object and sign.4

Rather than relying on linguistic expression, the semiotic is
rooted in physical rhythms; it is characterized mainly by motions,
energies, and drives, and is "analogous only to vocal or kinetic
rhythm" (RPL 94). The mother's body is a crucial element of this
physicality, and performs two functions. The mother's body first of
all organizes and orders the drives within the developing subject.5
This process bonds and connects the mother to the infant: "Drives
involve pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that
connect and orient the body to the mother" (RPL 95). The infant is
bonded with the mother -- this stage's essential lack of separation
prevents any sense of otherness: mother and infant are essentially
one.

However, while the body of the mother is ordering the drives,
it ironically moves the relationship toward separation, for in this
ordering, it prepares the child for what Kristeva terms the thetic: the
split marking the rupture of the semiotic, and the move toward the

4Kristeva relies partly on Lacan here, and the stage which he terms the
"Mirror Stage." In the mirror stage, the subject recognizes the other as that
which is removed from herself. The ability to recognize this separation is
necessary for the entrance into language (the symbolic), in which the split
between signifier and signified emerges.
5These are the primary drives, the sex drive and the death drive, as Freud
describes them.
symbolic. This rupture, the thetic split, revolves around two events: the mirror stage and the discovery of castration. The inevitable move back to a Freudian vocabulary is evident here. The mirror stage produces what Kristeva terms "spatial intuition": the awareness of positionality and separations within space that is fundamental to linguistic signification. The awareness of this space "permits the constitution of objects detached form the semiotic chora" (RPL 100). The notion of separation begins to be conceivable within the infant.

Castration completes this process of separation. The mother's body, up to this point, has been the site of and provider of every need. However, as Kristeva makes clear to us through her use of Freud, the discovery of the mother's "castration," the fundamental lack she possesses, causes the subject to relinquish dependence upon the mother;

the subject, finding his identity in the symbolic, separates from his fusion with the mother, confines his jouissance to the genital and transfers semiotic motility on to the symbolic order. Thus ends the formation of the thetic phase, which posits the gap between the signifier and the signified (RPL 101).

It is in this manner that Kristeva theorizes early development. During the semiotic, that unspeakable, physical stage prior to language, the mother's body prepares the subject for the entrance into the symbolic, or the law of the father.

Once the symbolic begins, then, what is the role of the semiotic? The chora is essentially unspeakable, ungraspable, irrational because of its position anterior to the Symbolic Law, and it
cannot be adequately articulated in our discourse. The chora is not, however, in direct opposition to the symbolic: "Our discourse, all discourse -- moves with and against the chora in the sense that it simultaneously depends on and refuses it" (RPL 94). The semiotic does not disappear with the thetic split; traces of it are discernible within the fabric of the symbolic. Such traces emerge when the signifier-signified gap is bridged, and becomes no longer arbitrary. Poetry, the artistic, musicality, and language pathologies provide many such examples (RPL 91).

The semiotic becomes a crucial element in the study of motherhood when it is considered that the social and historical position of the subject dynamically affects her receptivity to pulsings which bring the semiotic to the surface and rupture the order of the symbolic. Kristeva's depiction of the semiotic in Stabat Mater illustrates, through the oscillation between maternal, personal text and analytical discourse the power of the maternal to reveal the semiotic and challenge the Law. Through this process, Kristeva emphasizes her call for a new ethics, an héréthique which provides a new maternal discourse and challenges the supremacy of paternal law. Women, mothers in particular, occupy the social positions necessary for making these challenges.

Mothers have easier access to traces of the symbolic for several reasons. First of all, women as a group hold a position analogous to that of the semiotic. Their historical social position as the "second sex", submissive and often overlooked, places them in a position to resonate with the semiotic, which can become buried beneath the
Jane Van Buren asserts that Kristeva, in her writing, can "bear states of mind that are most often concealed in conscious discourse . . . she can hear and recognize their implicit call as a mother, analyst, writer, and subject" (Van Buren 238-9). All women, because of their position comparable to that of the semiotic, similarly respond to its later reverberations more easily. While the semiotic is experienced by the male infant as well as the female, traces of it within the symbolic are more readily accessible to the female subject in modern society.

The mother in particular is even more susceptible to allowing these traces to emerge. The mother's body, as described, is the organizing principle within the semiotic, and is thus more fully rooted in this stage, more open to its pulsings. Not only is the physicality of motherhood rooted in the semiotic, but the mother calls on two experiences of the semiotic -- her own and her child's. There is, furthermore, something in the motherly position that at its core challenges the pervasiveness of the Law; in Stabat Mater, Kristeva writes, "The 'just the same' of motherly peace of mind, more persistent than philosophical doubt, gnaws, on account of its basic disbelief, at the symbolic's allmightiness" (262). The maternal position thus creates space for the resurgence of the semiotic within the symbolic, and eventually for the foundation of Kristeva's hérétiquc.

With regard to maternity, and in particular its relationship to discourse, the semiotic is crucial primarily in the fluctuations it

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6 The second sex here refers to women, not simply mothers. Simone de Beauvoir refers to all women with this term, as a description of the relation between the sexes.
allows. The semiotic and the symbolic are in continual contention, the one repeatedly giving over to the other. Observing these rhythms in one instance of motherhood emphasizes both the relationship between the semiotic and motherhood, and the obstacles to discourse created by its persistence. By exploring these difficulties throughout other depictions of Medea, we see the persistence of the semiotic's refusal of language. The impasse this creates is that if a new discourse is to properly address motherhood, it must include the semiotic, which is ironically intrinsically removed from discourse. How than can we incorporate the semiotic into this discourse, and what is the relationship between discourse and Kristeva's semiotic?

II. The Semiotic in Euripides' Medea

Because Euripides' Medea is a particularly complex treatment of motherhood, and because it has become a model to which most other Medeas are compared, it provides an exceptional site to begin to examine the semiotic, and how it relates to motherhood. When he wrote Medea in 431 B.C., Euripides was not unfamiliar with the theme of motherhood. Ironically often labeled a misogynist for his treatment of women, he deals extensively with motherhood in his plays, often placing mothers in major roles. Medea, Clytemnestra, and Hecuba are principal characters in his plays, and Euripides addresses the theme of motherhood through them, in plays such as Electra, Hecuba, Medea, and The Women of Troy, all of which had been publicly performed when Medea was written. Each of these mothers
manifests an intricate web of apparent contradictions. Hecuba is at once both nurturing and frighteningly violent. Clytemnestra is nearly absent within the action of Electra, yet her prominent presence as a character propels the movement of the play.

Medea is a particularly shocking mother in that she manifests these contradictions to an extreme. She is violent yet nurturing, raving yet level-headed. She typifies the nurturing/violent contradiction to the utmost. She is a protective mother, highly concerned with the well-being of her two sons. Faced with separation from them, her sorrow is immense:

\[\ldots\] And I must go
To exile in another land, before I have seen you growing up,
Becoming prosperous. I shall never see your brides,
Adorn your bridal beds, and hold the torches high.
\[\ldots\] Parted from you,
My life will be all pain and anguish. (48-9)

Her pity and love for them are genuine, but are mingled with bitter hatred. "Children, your mother is hated," she exclaims, "and you are cursed: Death take you, with your father, and perish his whole house!" (20). In Medea's character, "warmth of feeling grows on the same stem as emotional excess and the propensity to violence" (Velacott 9). The rhythm of movement between these opposing traits is erratic and continues throughout the play.

In these seeming incongruities of character, Medea exhibits not inconsistency or hypocrisy, but rather the oscillation between semiotic and symbolic in a subject particularly receptive to the semiotic's pulsings. As I will argue, there are two distinctive
rhythms or oscillations within her character: the rupture of the symbolic linguistically, as seen in breakdowns in language, and the social manifestation of this which emerges in Medea's defiance of the patriarchal order. These rhythms, which lead up to the final act of infanticide, are necessarily parallel and related to each other. Kristeva explains that the semiotic is "put in place by a biological setup and is always already social and therefore historical" (RPL 118). The rupture of the symbolic by the semiotic in language is marked by interruptions, breaks, and other gaps in signification. Socially, such traces can then be linked to breaks in the patriarchal order, which holds a position analogous to that of the linguistic symbolic order.

**The Semiotic/Symbolic Fluctuation**

The first oscillation, that between semiotic and symbolic, occurs with breakdowns in Medea's language. Euripides portrays her as having at times great skills of expression and at other times being completely unable to communicate verbally. Her extended dialogue with Jason exemplifies this shifting back and forth. Through most of their exchange, Medea argues her position articulately. She coolly disguises her intentions to win Jason's favor:

Jason, I ask you to forgive the things I said.
You must bear with my violent temper; you and I
Share many memories of love. I have been taking
Myself to task . . . So now I welcome
What you have done; I think you are wise to gain for us
This new alliance . . . (43-4).
With her words Medea convinces Jason of her change of heart, and gains for herself his unknowing aid in her scheme. He will allow the children to visit his new wife and present to her the gift that eventually kills her. Medea gains this foothold by functioning within the realm of the symbolic, depending on language as a persuasive tool.

Within this dialogue, however, traces of the more physical, nonverbal semiotic emerge; twice her speech is interrupted by an emotional outburst. As she asks the boys to take their father's hand, Medea (according to the stage directions) "turns away in a sudden flood of weeping" and then continues: "Forgive me; I recalled / What pain the future hides from us" (44). The second instance of this occurs as Medea speaks of seeing her sons growing older, at which point she again "breaks down and weeps" (45). These breaches within the fabric of the symbolic function as resurgences of the semiotic in both form and content.

The act of weeping is, first of all, primarily physical. Physicality, as previously stated, constitutes one of the main traits of the semiotic. A bodily reaction interrupts the flow of the symbolic, and arouses an emergence of the semiotic. Because Medea, as a mother, is receptive to such physical movements, the coexistence of semiotic and symbolic is more prevalent in her character than others. Secondly, these momentary spells of weeping recall the semiotic in content. They are motivated by Medea's feeling for her sons, and her sorrow at losing them. The semiotic in addition to its physicality, is marked by the mother-child bond, the lack of any separation
between the two.

It is important to note here that a mother has two experiences with the symbolic: her own infancy as well as her memory of her children as infants. While it is unrealistic to attempt to determine which one Medea recalls at every moment, we can see the influence of both encounters in Medea’s actions. She displays both the effects of the semiotic on her love for her sons, as well as traces of her own pre-verbal stage, in episodes where she does not function within language. The example noted above might well call upon both experiences. Also, the semiotic emerges in many other instances (when language breaks down, in physicality, etc.), not only the example of weeping described above.

The oscillation within the above dialogue between semiotic and symbolic indicates not the conflict of two opposing forces, but instead the interaction of two necessarily dependent processes: "the subject is always both semiotic and symbolic, no signifying system he produces can be either 'exclusively' semiotic or 'exclusively' symbolic, and is instead necessarily marked by indebtedness to both" (RPL 93). Medea does however, manifest this interaction more apparently than say, the other characters of this play. Breaks in language, physical or otherwise, are attributed more often to Medea. The others are presented primarily through their words, and not through actions, breaks, or other possible traces of semiotic interruptions. She is, as a mother, more open to these influences.

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7Kristeva describes this physical bond through personal experience in "Stabat Mater": "My body is no longer mine, it doubles up, suffers, bleeds, catches cold, puts its teeth in, slobbers, coughs, is covered with pimples, and it laughs" (241). The mother's bodily experience is one with the child's.
The Subsequent Challenge of the Patriarchy

Medea's receptivity to the rhythms of the semiotic allow not only her occasional breakdowns in language, but also account for her defiance of the patriarchal order. Her linguistic and psychological openness to the semiotic are socially manifested in her sympathy for the inferior position of women, and her willingness to challenge the patriarchy, which is represented by the men in power and by the tenets of Corinthian society. As Kristeva writes in *Stabat Mater*, "I yearn for the Law. And since it is not made for me, I venture to desire outside the law" (250). This paradoxical need for and simultaneous need to transcend the patriarchal Law are exhibited in continual swayings in Medea's character; she oscillates, as before, between dependence on (and sometimes use of) the patriarchy and refusal of its required order.

She exhibits, for example, vehement refusals of the patriarchy's domination at several instances. Through Medea, Euripides devotes significant time to the plight of women. She has several poignant, detailed speeches that outline the many sufferings of women. "Surely of all creatures that have life and will," she says, "we women are the most wretched" (24). She complains that she must buy a husband at a great price, and he then owns *her* body. If he is not a good husband, she must accept this fate, for divorce is unacceptable for women. As a foreign woman, she suffers more in trying to understand the customs of marriage in Corinth. Furthermore, while Jason is free to go to other women, Medea must "look to one man only" (24). For Medea, childbearing and motherhood only add to this
list of trials. It is in this type of tirade that Medea exhibits her unwillingness to passively accept the role that has been relegated to her by the patriarchy.

At times throughout the drama, however, Medea embraces the patriarchy, subscribing to the hierarchy and order it maintains. One facet of the patriarchy which she accepts throughout the play is the hierarchy of gods. She continually appeals to the their power, never questioning their authority. "Mighty Themis! Dread Artemis!" she proclaims, "Do you see how I am used - / In spite of the great oaths I bound him with - / By my accursed husband?" (22). Her references to the deities, are not however, all empty evocations. Medea truly believes in their power, up through the close of the play. She believes that Helios saved her from her enemies, and as she is drawn away by his chariot, she once again invokes Zeus' power. "Zeus the father of all / Knows well what service I once rendered you, and how / You have repaid me," she says to Jason, confident of Zeus' position and his power to enact justice.

Medea's recognition of the supremacy of the patriarchy extends beyond the gods to the men around her and the laws they uphold. She acknowledges several times that as a foreigner she knows she must accept her place in society: "Of course a stranger must conform; even a Greek / Should not annoy his fellows by crass stubbornness. / I accept my place" (24). This consent to an inferior position continues with Medea's dependence on and suppliance of the authority of men. She cannot carry out her schemes without them, and hopes for some "strong tower of help" to appear and assist her (29). This hope does come to her, in the form of Aegeus. With his
promise to harbor her in his home, her worries about her future are eased: "Just where my plot was weakest, at that very point / Help appeared in this man Aegeus; he is a haven / Where I shall find safe mooring . . ." (41). Medea is, in several instances, willing to depend on men and accede to her inferior status as a woman. She accepts patriarchal law and subscribes to the order it prescribes. This vacillation in Medea's character is parallel to and directly related to her movements between the semiotic and the symbolic.

While Medea fluctuates with regard to the established order, the moments in which she challenges it determine much of her action throughout the play. Her principal decision -- to challenge Jason's remarriage and her own exile -- is driven by her inclination toward defiance rather than acquiescence. These actions posit her against the status quo, the order of society, and ultimately the patriarchy. Creon and Jason, two distinctive representatives of the patriarchy, sense this challenge and attempt to eliminate it from Corinth. Creon, the ruler of the city (a typical symbol of order) attempts to exclude Medea and the disorder she causes from Corinth. He even admits to the fear that he feels of Medea. Jason, in response to Medea's outrages against him, stresses that Corinth is a "society in which force yields place to law" (33). There is no place for rage like Medea's. Because of her anger and uncontrollability, Medea cannot live in such a society. "Maternal anger at separation and betrayal . . ." says Marianne Hirsch, "must be domesticated or eradicated if the structure of civilization is to be maintained" (38). Thus, Jason and Creon (who reject the semiotic aspects of Medea's character -- her
anger, physicality, and challenge of the law) attempt to hasten her departure, in order to preserve the patriarchal organization of their society.

This apparent incompatibility of Medea's defiance and support for women with the structure of Corinthian society is upheld by the chorus as well. Upon hearing of Medea's plan to murder her children, they exclaim: "Streams of the sacred rivers flow uphill / Tradition, order, all things are reversed" (29). And later, in trying to dissuade her from the murder, they stress the opposition between this act and all established society:

Then how will such a city,  
Watered by sacred rivers,  
A country giving protection to its friends -  
How will Athens welcome  
You, the child-killer  
Whose presence is pollution?". (43)

The city, or polis, was the organizing principle at that time, representing the order and structure of Greek society. In threatening to murder her own children in revenge, Medea is seen as directly opposed to the city and its prescribed order. Her presence becomes "pollution," which endangers the orderly structure of the city.

However, as the semiotic is not opposed to the symbolic, but rather submerged beneath it, Medea's actions are not completely

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8As Jean Pierre Vernant points out, the polis "was the social order that held the power of all individuals in check, setting limits on the urge to enlarge one's scope . . . Any individual or faction that tried to secure a monopoly on arche (power) threatened the homonoia (unanimity) of the social body . . . and thereby put the city's very existence at risk" (67).
independent of or in conflict with the patriarchy. The two extremes in this fluctuation are closer than they appear, and in fact are in constant interaction with one another. Just as she cannot fully escape the symbolic (nor would she want to) simply because the semiotic surfaces, Medea cannot subvert the patriarchy entirely. She not only depends on it at times, but also uses it to her advantage, for she must function within the laws of the patriarchy in order to eventually challenge it.

The two function together, for example, in Medea's plea that her children be spared. In asking Jason that they not be exiled, she assumes the position of a passive, accepting wife. She no longer criticizes Jason's new marriage, but praises him instead, calling the marriage an astute political move. She even says that she should have helped in the preparation of his marriage bed. In this acceptance of the patriarchy's role for her, she goes so far as to imply the inferior nature of women: "But we women -- I won't say we are bad by nature, / But we are what we are" (44). Just as Medea uses the symbolic throughout the play to argue her case, she also functions adeptly within the boundaries of the patriarchal system. She must acknowledge and obey its laws at times, if she is to ultimately defy it.

Thus, while Medea assumes a submissive position for Jason, she simultaneously plans her revenge for Jason's remarriage and Creon's order that she be exiled. Through her assumed submissiveness, she regains Jason's trust and creates the space in which she can murder Jason's new wife, Creon, and eventually her sons. Medea uses the patriarchy and the roles it assigns to the sexes to her own advantage
in her scheme against this patriarchal order. She defeats Creon and his exile of her, and Jason who had betrayed her in remarrying. Medea successfully challenges a society in which women are subject to men's laws and must accept what is decreed for them. She does, however, make use of the patriarchal order, rather than completely avoiding it, which would be impossible. We see in her actions concrete evidence of the interrelationship between the semiotic and the symbolic.

Thus, two more or less distinct oscillations are observable in Medea's character: one between the semiotic and the symbolic, and the other between patriarchal order and a challenge of this order. Neither of these, however, is between two exclusive, opposing extremes. Just as Kristeva points out in Revolution in Poetic Language that the semiotic and the symbolic are continually interacting, so too are the patriarchy and Medea's defiance of it. One cannot even begin to conceive of the semiotic without the symbolic: "These two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language" (Revolution 92). The same follows for the patriarchy, within which Medea must function before she can even think of challenging its supremacy.

The Ultimate Upsurge of the Semiotic . . .

There is, however, a traditional imbalance in each of these oscillations, in favor of both the Symbolic Order and the Patriarchal Order. Both the semiotic and the maternal often become buried beneath the symbolic, and are thus often overlooked (Van Buren 238). And in the social domain the patriarchy traditionally takes
precedence over feminist concerns. Therefore, while the two elements of each oscillation do work together, this interaction is often impeded by the traditional disregard for one element in the equation.

What then is the result when this buried, overlooked element is allowed to resurface? An indication of the answer can be found in Medea's most unimaginable act, the murder of her children. At this moment, the two parallel rhythms in Medea's character converge to create this monstrous act. In her vacillation between semiotic and symbolic, Medea at this point is beyond the realm of language, and the semiotic unquestionably surfaces. Her sympathy with the semiotic during the murder is attested to by Medea's removal from the audience, both physically and linguistically. She no longer speaks -- the evidence of the murder is the boys' screams and the chorus' reaction. Medea herself is in a world beyond language.

Once again the societal reflects the linguistic, and the evidence is even more dramatic. Medea has taken the patriarchal order's mandates for her and her sons, and violently retaliated; she ardently opposes the patriarchy and its position of authority. She does so with an act that in itself violates all tradition; the murder of her sons. Sons were as prized then if not more that they are today. When Medea defends her worth as a wife, she emphasizes that she has had sons for Jason: "you have the wickedness / To turn me out, to get yourself another wife, / Even after I had borne you sons! / If you had still been childless I could have pardoned you . . ." (31). While Medea does injure herself through this act, Jason, as a father, has a greater stake in the lives of his sons: "the mother's stake in her
offspring is merely personal, whereas the father is dependent on his heirs for the preservation of his estate and family line" (Rudnytsky 38). In then killing her sons, Medea renounces the value that has been placed on having male children, and transgresses against all social tradition.

Thus, Medea's act of infanticide can be interpreted as a strong upsurge of the semiotic, disturbing the order of the symbolic and patriarchal law. As Kristeva notes in Revolution in Poetic Language, such a violent act is typical of a break in the symbolic: "In all known archaic societies, this founding break of the symbolic order is represented by murder -- the killing of a man, a slave, a prisoner, an animal" (119). What, then, can we make of such an act? The violence and horror it embodies provoke serious questions about the nature of the semiotic and its role in society.

If this is a stage in which the mother is ultimately bonded with the child, in which there is no fundamental separation, then a trace of this stage in infanticide is inherently problematic. This might be labeled as a recollection of Medea's own original semiotic, as an infant, since she does not exhibit any evidence of a bond with her sons. However, this act is an upsurge of her experience as a mother with her sons. Before their entrance into language, she prepared them for the separation that occurred with the start of the thetic. Now, in once again thrusting them from her, she mirrors this movement. This, like the violent breaking away into the thetic phase, separates mother from child, but now more definitely and observably.

In the moment of the murders, Medea balances precariously
between the semiotic and the thetic. She functions within the semiotic, yet moves explicitly toward a recreation of the thetic break, which occurs at the moment of the murders. The act of murder is a definitive move out of the semiotic, but we don't yet see evidence of the symbolic or language. With the murders, Medea recreates the spatial separation that the mirror stage inaugurates. She and her sons are still, however, in the realm of the physical, and the linguistic split, signifier-signified, is not yet conceived in this re-playing out of the boys' early development. Medea functions here in a repetition of the thetic phase, before the symbolic officially begins.

With this act, or more specifically in its aftermath, the unspeakability of the semiotic truly emerges. As the culmination of Medea's receptivity to both symbolic and semiotic (as delineated by Kristeva), the murder cannot be situated fully within symbolic discourse. After the murders, language enters the picture, in the form of the other characters' attempts to explain what has happened. Their language, however, is inadequate in accounting for her actions. The confusion produced by the murders testifies to the substantiality of breakdowns in discourse and communication. Because the semiotic is so closely rooted in motherhood, the distance between the semiotic and language leads to the lack of a discourse for motherhood.

... and the Ensuing Disorder

The response of the chorus typifies the impossibility of accurately speaking about what Medea has done. Earlier in the play, when Medea had first suggested her plan to kill her sons, the chorus
responded: "Legend will now reverse our reputation; / A time comes when the female sex is honoured" (29). They go on to predict that poets will no longer sing of unfaithful women, and women will gain the same status as men. They see hope in her efforts that the position of women will be improved. After the deed is done, they dramatically change their tone. Rejecting their earlier interpretation of this act as a step forward for women, they exclaim, "What can be strange or terrible after this? / O bed of women, full of passion and pain, / What wickedness, what sorrow you have caused on the earth!" (57). Women, as a group, have been shamed, in their eyes, rather than exalted by Medea's deed.

How can we account for the complete shift in judgment exhibited by the chorus? Certainly it can be somewhat accounted for by their realization of the horror of infanticide only after the act had been committed. However, this change also stems from the sheer difficulty they have in talking about semiotic issues. While they applaud Medea's efforts to challenge Jason's mistreatment of her, they are utterly horrified that she accomplishes it through the death of her sons. Medea's acts are incomprehensible, even today, and the confusion they cause renders our discourse incapable of fully encompassing or explaining them.

Jason in his response is similarly incredulous. He as well denounces Medea, as an "abomination," and an "unclean, abhorrent child-destroyer" (59-60). He hurls countless curses at her, recounting their life together and all the sins she committed. Jason brings out the inconceivability of her act: "You could endure -- a mother! -- to lift a sword against / Your own little ones" he cries,
questioning how she could murder the children that she admits even later were dear to her. His astonishment and utter horror at this lead only to his "Ah, what's the use?" for he cannot fully express them (58).

In striking contrast to the reactions of his characters, Euripides constructs an ending which, rather than punishing Medea for killing her children, frees her from blame and rescues her from the scene. The sun god sends a chariot to carry her away, and Jason is left with his life in shambles -- his father, new wife, and two sons all dead. Medea indicates that the gods are on her side: “Touch us you cannot, in this chariot which the Sun / Has sent to save us from the hands of enemies” (58). Euripides, through the gods, seems to condone Medea’s violence, rage, and her horrific act of murder. How can we reconcile this ending with the responses of the other characters and with our own disinclination toward murder?

Perhaps they are not at all reconcilable. The chorus hints at this in the closing lines of the play, when they label Medea's vindication as an unexplainable act of the gods:

Many matters the gods bring to surprising ends.
The things we thought would happen do not happen;
The unexpected God makes possible;
and such is the conclusion of this story. (61)

As Medea demonstrates, the semiotic creates within motherhood actions and emotions which do not conform to the explanations of symbolic discourse. As Julia Kristeva lets us see, when the semiotic comes forth in such a way, its results are often confusing and unexplainable. They defy the systems of logic and reasoning that we
depend on, and so we fall back upon easy explanations, such as the will of the gods, as Euripides demonstrates through his chorus.

III. Violence in the Medea Legend

In dramatizing the mythical story of Medea, and in creating her as a child murderer, Euripides produces an intriguing and troublesome character for the playwrights and artists who followed him. She is a more complex character than many from classical mythology, and thus her story has withstood countless revisions and retellings. Because her actions in the original play are so rooted in the semiotic, the presentation of her character involves many obstacles. The difficulties exposed in Euripides' ending play out to an even greater extent in many of these other versions. Her contradictory personality and the inconceivability of her acts are manifested in depictions of Medea throughout history. I will examine three versions here--Pierre Corneille, Christine de Pizan, and Carlos Morton--in light of their treatment of her violence, and how these authors attempt to reconcile difficulties of representation.

One aspect of the semiotic which is highly problematic is violence. Being formed mainly of physicality and motion, traces of the semiotic often are exhibited outwardly as violence. When the symbolic breaks down, frustration and anger are released instead through the physical. Kristeva portrays this possibility for violence in the bold, personal sections of Stabat Mater, predominantly when she speaks of childbirth. She describes "infernos bursting veins, stones breaking bones: grinders of volumes," (242) and later speaks of the repression inherent in maternal anger, that builds and builds
"like a delayed orgasm" (257). This mounting tension, and the violence necessary to release it lead to a violence which Euripides depicts at an extreme in Medea.

In Medea's case, this violence is the semiotic's most troubling consequence. While in other cases of motherhood the semiotic might spur other unspeakable traits, in Medea it stirs up a troubling brutality. Medea, as a woman, is not expected to be (or accepted as) violent; it is the man's sphere. And not only is she a woman, but a mother as well, who lashes out against her own sons. In our culture, the thought of maternal violence has become incredibly difficult to accept. (The rise of the Virgin Mary as an archetypal mother reflects this phenomenon.) Much of Medea's appeal and her repulsion stems from this often troubling contradiction she embodies-- the coexistence of the maternal and the violent.9

This seemingly impossible pairing of traits leads directly to difficulties of expression. An interesting phenomenon occurs in many representations of Medea: a reluctance or failure to present the combination of womanhood and violence in its full intensity. Because this combination is so inherently unthinkable to us, it is indescribable, and language fails to accommodate it. Whether by blaming her acts on others or easing their brutality these artists affirm a common inability to address the coupling of motherhood and violent power. These three portrayals of Medea -- Corneille, Christine de Pizan, and Carlos Morton -- deal with the motherhood/violence dilemma in three different manners. They

9This idea of that which is both appealing and repulsive can be studied more thoroughly in Kristeva's Powers of Horror. She describes the abject as that to which we are simultaneously drawn and repelled.
each tend to emphasize one element of this pair, either her motherhood or her violence, and thus avoid the need to express them together.

**Pierre Corneille's *Médée***

The first of these texts, Pierre Corneille's 1635 drama *Médée*, weighs her violent aspects more heavily than her role as a mother. Corneille does this by separating her from humanity, specifically by transforming her into a sorceress. This is not a unique addition to the Medea story. While in Euripides she had supernatural powers, she was still entirely endowed with human emotions and weaknesses. In the 1360s, however, Giovanni Boccaccio describes her as "the most cruel example of ancient wickedness . . . the best trained woman in evil-doing . . . she knew perfectly how to disturb the sky, gather the winds from their dens, cause tempests, hold back rivers . . ." in *Concerning Famous Women* (35). His scathing description continues and ends in a moral attack against Medea's actions.

While Boccaccio's account of Medea is a short narrative in his volume on many prominent women, Corneille's drama is a more in-depth study of Medea as a witch. Corneille foregrounds two aspects of Medea's character quite prominently: her violence and her supernatural powers. In the balance between motherhood and violence, Corneille favors her violence. We are reminded continually of her previous acts of murder. Jason, Pollux, Creon, and Medea herself all refer back to the murders of Medea's father and brother throughout the play, as evidence of her violent nature. Her violence
is highlighted as well through her reactions to Jason. In her first soliloquy, she hopes for a "bleeding divorce, in murders and carnage" to end her marriage to Jason (1.4.245; my translation). This brutality continues throughout the play, never giving way to any sense of gentleness in her character.

Corneille not only emphasizes her savagery, but also downplays her role as a mother. He does so by continually reinforcing her supernatural powers and removing her from the sphere of humanity. Medea is absent during the first few scenes, as in many versions of Medea, so her reputation can be established through the other characters. Euripides, for instance, uses the exposition to introduce her rage at Jason's remarriage. Corneille, on the other hand, develops her role as a sorceress in these opening scenes. Jason and Pollux discuss Medea and what has happened between her and Jason. They describe her powers and how she rejuvenated a lamb, and later Jason's father. Pollux has heard of her powers: "I know how her arts, controlling the destinies, restored [Aeson] to the vigour of his young years," he admits (1.1.53-4). He then warns Jason to beware of "her charms." Through this opening discussion, Corneille firmly establishes Medea's supernatural powers.

When Medea herself comes to the stage, she confirms that this reputation is deserved. Her first appearance is a long soliloquy in which she invokes the darker powers of evil, supplicating them to carry out her plans for revenge. She cries:

And you, troop all-knowing in malicious ways
Daughters of Hades, plagues, pests, furies,
Proud sisters, if ever our intimate exchanges
Brought me favor with you and your serpents . . .
Summon up from the depths of the caves of hell
The death of my rival and her father. (1.4.211-18)

She not only directly appeals to these demonic forces, but
acknowledges them as sisters and refers to the business she has
conducted with them. She recites a similar chant-like ritual when
preparing the golden gown for Creusa. Her sorcery is presented at its
utmost when a messenger arrives frantically with the news of
Creusa's gruesome demise, and Medea gives him a baton hit that
renders him immobile. She makes him recount his news, then gives
him another tap of the wand, and he continues on his way. Corneille,
through such situations, constantly reminds the audience that she is
a sorceress.

David Clarke argues that these references to Medea's arts
diminish her "claim to self-sufficiency" and that as a result her
power loses much of its "splendour" (134). However, the significant
loss is not actually in splendour or initial impact; Medea is still
shockingly violent and powerful. What is lost in this version is her
humanity, and thus her ultimate relevance. She is not, as in other
dramas, a human woman who has some knowledge of the
supernatural, but instead a fully supernatural sorceress. When Creon
remarks that one day is too little for a woman to accomplish
anything, Pollux replies, "It's little for a woman, but plenty for her
arts: / Don't judge her charms by human powers" (4.2.1118-9).
Medea then even acknowledges her exemption from human
standards: "Do you measure my power against that of humans?" she
indignantly questions Jason (3.3.903). Medea, through her sorcery, is
removed from the standards applied to humans, and placed in a more supernatural realm.

By making her less human, Corneille also makes her less of a mother. She is not limited by human standards of power, nor is she affected by her role as a human mother. This reduction of her maternal role is also substantiated by her lack of compassion for the children. While other playwrights, such as Euripides and Robinson Jeffers portray her as hesitant about murdering the children, Corneille presents very little of this maternal affection. He instead distances her from both humanity and motherhood. In doing so, Corneille skirts the issue of the contradictions presented by Medea; in making her a sorceress, he can present her grotesque acts of violence, without attributing them to a mother.

His discomfort with a pairing of motherhood and violence is expressed by Pollux, who anticipates the infanticide, and conjectures that "she imagines, in her hate for their father, / that being no longer his wife, that she is no longer their mother" (4.4.1141-2). If she were to kill the two boys, she must not consider herself their mother, for the thought of a mother killing her children is wholly inconceivable. This reasoning continues with Medea's justification of the act. She asserts: "Nature, I can do this without violating your laws, / For [the children] come from you, and are no longer mine" (5.2.1136). In Corneille's interpretation, Medea does not commit infanticide, for in her thinking they are no longer her children. Through such arguments, he evades the difficult repercussions of infanticide and of the semiotic's effects on Medea. Since these elements present great complications in symbolic discourse, he
This violent, otherworldly Medea is most common among representations of Medea; the appeal of this tale is, without a doubt, the extent of her violence, and so to forego it would mean the loss of the story's allure. A disregard for Medea's motherhood therefore preserves the initial shock value, yet avoids the difficult coupling of motherhood and violence. Nevertheless, there are those representations of Medea which deny her violence in favor of emphasizing her humanity, and in particular her role as a mother.

**Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies***

Two striking examples of this, Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*, and Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*, both originate from around the year 1400. During this time, women were generally viewed as unclean, dangerous and unholy. These two texts fit into a group of medieval writings which debate the role of women, often by retelling the tales of classical and mythical women. In presenting a pious, blame-free Medea, these two authors participate in this *querelle des femmes* by opposing the then widely-held view of women as morally inferior. Boccaccio's *Concerning Famous Women*, takes part in the same tradition, but as mentioned earlier, in its caustic misogyny falls on the other side of the debate.

In denouncing the prevailing view of women, both Christine de Pizan and Chaucer blatantly ignore Medea's violent nature. She in particular disregards the contradictions of a violent mother in order

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10Carol Meale describes the *querelle des femmes* as a movement which included "the claims of women to be taken seriously as the subject of literary representation" (56).
to avoid the need to confront or explain Medea's character. In *The Book of the City of Ladies*, Christine de Pizan tells the story of the building of an ideal dwelling place for all good women. As the city is built, she addresses such issues as why men malign women in their writings and the role of women in government. And then to confirm the merits of women, she tells the tales of many famous women, both classical and contemporary.

She writes of Medea in two different chapters, never once mentioning her revenge against Creusa and Creon or the infanticide. Her first description of Medea is as being "very beautiful, with a noble and upright heart and a pleasant face" (1.31.1). She later describes her relationship with Jason and their adventures together. After describing how Jason left her for Creusa, she concludes, "For this reason, Medea, who would rather have destroyed herself than do anything of this kind to him, turned despondent, nor did her heart ever again feel goodness or joy" (2.56.1). She not only overlooks her most horrid acts, but never once describes Medea in terms of anger or vengefulness. Her Medea is passive and sorrowful, and most importantly *good*, never actively vengeful.

Why does Christine de Pizan omit the most crucial episodes in the Medea story, the ones that to us define Medea's character? She was undoubtedly familiar with versions that included them. In fact, Boccaccio, Christine de Pizan's main source, depicts Medea murdering her sons as Jason watches, a horrifying twist unique to his portrayal of her. She also cites Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which includes the original violent episodes, including the murders: "Then, savagely she drew her sword, and bathed / It in the blood of her own infant sons;
By which atrocious act she was revenged" (Metamorphoses 292). She was thus clearly aware of the violent episodes in the Medea tale, yet chose to disregard them.

Christine de Pizan's concern with women's status and righteousness surely motivated her softening of Medea's character. Carol Meale asserts that this work is the "logical outcome of the dissatisfaction with books and the patriarchal tradition of literature" (64). In the narrative, Reason, one of Christine's guides, assures her that "women were in general gentler, more pious, and charitable than men, more sober and less naturally cruel too" (McLeod 128). This prevailing sentiment, along with her personal interests in proclaiming the virtues of women, played a significant role in Christine's treatment of Medea. The views of women that she opposed were harsh. Andreas Capellanus writes, in The Art of Courtly Love,

not only is every woman by nature a miser, but she is also envious and a slanderer of other women, greedy, a slave to her belly, inconstant . . . spotted with the sin of pride and desirous of vainglory, a liar, a drunkard, a babbler, no keeper of secrets, too much given to wantonness, prone to every evil, and never loving any man in her heart.

Such was the general stereotype that medieval women faced, and against which Christine de Pizan argues.

She thus tames Medea, in order to further her argument of women's piety. Instead of envy and anger, sins women were too commonly accused of, Pizan renders her more "properly feminine," substituting sadness for rage. This portrayal goes against popular
misogynist views of women, and supports the argument she makes in *The Book of the City of Ladies*. Since she believed women were pious and good, the traditional image of Medea was unacceptable to her, and did not accord with her argument. If she were to present Medea's violence, she would then have to explain it. This explanation, while difficult even when Medea's reputation is not an issue, would be entirely impossible for Christine de Pizan, for in her case, Medea's story falls outside the realm of logical explanation.

Whatever her motivation, Christine de Pizan lessens Medea's power in a way that makes her less harmful, and less contradictory. By transforming her reaction to Jason from rage to despondency, she neutralizes the threat posed by a vengeful mother, and portrays her as a victim. She is no longer the aggressor in the story, but instead a victim. Thus, she does not need to address the issue of a violent woman or mother, which in its semiotic origins, presents difficulties of explanation.

Carlos Morton's *La Malinche*

While Christine de Pizan's treatment of Medea is brief in comparison to many of the dramas, the pattern of lessening Medea's violence can be observed in other works, such as Carlos Morton's *La Malinche*, a recent adaptation of Euripides. Although Morton uses the Greek drama in an innovative and ambitious way, like Christine de Pizan he presents Medea as a mother *should* be presented, in a highly favorable light, and in doing so compromises the complexity of her character. Morton freely adapts Euripides' drama to the story of Spanish conqueror Hernando Cortes and his Mayan mistress Dona
Marina, or La Malinche. While the two stories are similar, Morton does fictionalize Malinche's story to fit Euripides. She was betrayed by Cortes for a Spanish woman, but did not kill their son. Here, Morton uses Euripidean elements to conclude the play; Malinche poisons a dress and offers it to Cortes' new bride, and then murders her own son.

The character of Medea/Malinche is, however, significantly altered by Morton from his Greek source. Whereas Euripides characterizes Medea with dramatic oscillations between affection for her children and disregard for them, Morton depicts her as primarily maternal and affectionate. Protecting her son motivates all of her actions. Malinche never lashes out in anger against her son, Martin, and remains nurturing even up to the murder scene. While in Euripides, Medea does use the protection of the boys as part of her rationale, her main motive is to punish Jason. Morton removes the motive of revenge, and foregrounds the maternal affection. Instead of murdering her son to spite Cortes, she murders him for his own sake, so he won't grow up an outsider, accepted in neither of his cultures. Morton thus interprets the infanticide as an act of caring, rather than vengeance.

The change in the main character's disposition and the playwright's aversion toward maternal violence emerge most fully in the final murder scene. Malinche is protective of Martin until the end, as she leads him up the steps of the pyramid that fills the stage. The figure of Malinche never physically kills her son in this rendition -- she carefully leads him into the arms of a figure dressed in black, wearing the mask of death, who raises a dagger above Martin's head.
Malinche stands triumphantly and cries, "Martin, you are a warrior!" The act of murder is physically removed from Malinche, and assumed by the personified death. Malinche thus retains her position as the good mother, protecting her son from a racist world.

Morton, in his interpretation of Euripides, makes a move similar to Christine de Pizan's, of downplaying Medea's violent nature. He foregrounds instead her maternal affection, so as to circumvent the dilemma of a violent, vengeful mother. He, like Christine de Pizan, may be working toward a political agenda that accommodates a more complimentary depiction of Medea. The director, Abel Lopez, speaks of the play's message about cultural identity: "It speaks to anyone who is trying to reconcile the impact of different cultures on their lives" (Lawson C2). With its theme of cultural cooperation, the play cannot portray its protagonist as too violent, or the message is blurred. That this move is explicable does not reduce its significance. Conditions in our societal structures and stereotypes reinforce the persistent need to dissolve any combination of the maternal with the violent.

All of these examples further illustrate the lacking in our discourse with regard to motherhood. We do not have the tools to speak adequately about motherhood's contradictory nature. This phenomenon stems from both the correlation of motherhood with the semiotic and our society's strict stereotypes for motherhood, which do not admit elements of the semiotic. Because the semiotic is so removed from the symbolic realm, the tools of symbolic discourse are inherently unable to express it. The Law of the Father pervades our systems of thought so completely that we cannot break into a
mode of discourse which encompasses motherhood.

The issue now arises of whether or not it is possible, artistically, to capture this seemingly paradoxical aspect of Medea's character, and if so, in what way. While the theory of the semiotic allows for contradictions within motherhood, it does not solve the problem of a motherhood discourse, because the semiotic itself defies discourse. Kristeva does create the space for images of motherhood which don't conform to rigid standards; motherhood opens up, allowing contradictions, enigmas and uncertainties. She admits, however, in closing *Stabat Mater* that we still require a new ethic that encompasses motherhood. An examination of Medea within sculpture, art and opera, opens up a new avenue of pursuit of this ethics.

**IV. Medea in Art**

Artistic modes of expression hold the potential for a more complex depiction of motherhood in that they are less rooted in symbolic discourse. Kristeva touches upon the possibility for breaches within the symbolic through art in *Revolution in Poetic Language*. "In 'artistic' practices the semiotic -- the precondition of the symbolic -- is revealed as that which also destroys the symbolic," she asserts (103). She focuses most heavily on modern poetic language, which in its challenge to the rules of syntax and grammar challenges as well the authority of the symbolic.

This holds true for other art forms as well. As noted before, the rupture of the symbolic is often represented by death, and is in fact rooted in death. Artistic practice is also firmly established in
death; in fact, in order to function, Kristeva writes, the artist must make himself the "bearer of death" (RPL 120). He brings to the realm of the symbolic remnants of the semiotic, and in doing so brings about ruptures of the symbolic order. The artist, like the mother, is more open to the preverbal and thus brings about its emergence within the realm of the verbal. Thus, while studying Medea in text-centered versions unearths a shying away from the semiotic, the possibility of a more versatile representation arises with art; the artist's openness to the semiotic might open the door to a realization of Kristeva's heréthique and the formulation of an ethics that would encompass motherhood.

Countless paintings, drawings, sculptures and operas treat the Medea myth through primarily non-verbal means. Martha Graham choreographed the story in modern dance in 1946. The story has been set to music in many ways, particularly opera, but also orchestral suites, cantatas, and choral compositions. This is a group of works rich with potential for a study of motherhood and the semiotic. Within the limits of this project, however, I will examine only three works within three different media: Eugène Delacroix's 1838 painting "Médée Furieuse," the marble statue by sculptor William Wetmore Story, and Luigi Cherubini's 1797 opera, as performed in 1953.

**Delacroix's "Médée Furieuse"**

Eugène Délacroix painted at the height of neoclassicism in French art, yet it is difficult to classify the artist within one specific period, for he exhibits the influences of both classicism and
romanticism. His fascination with subjects from antiquity, however, emerges fully in this portrayal of Medea. In this spectacular piece, he captures seemingly endless emotions and passions in the moment just before the infanticide. Medea, looking behind her to see if she is being pursued, holds the two struggling infants against her bare breast, and clutches a dagger in her left hand. The three figures appear to have entered a cave or passageway, and the main light source rests outside of this darker space.

Overall, the painting is very sensuous, the writhing bodies of the children held to Medea's fleshy, naked body. Medea's eyes are shaded, but she appears to be looking back over a landscape which she has just traversed. When exhibited at the Salon, the work received great praise. In the journal La Quotidienne, one reviewer wrote that "one feels truly moved at the sight of this demented mother with haggard eye, pale face, livid mouth, palpitating flesh, and oppressed bosom" (in Délabroix 116). Other critics similarly noted the stirring effect the painting has on a viewer.

The effect of this work stems primarily from its power to capture the contradictory nature of Medea's act. With reference to the pair of traits I used earlier, violence and motherhood, Délabroix succeeds in portraying both simultaneously. First of all, neither the motherhood nor the humanity of this Medea are compromised. Her human emotion emerges in her frantic expression as she turns to see if she is being pursued. Her look is one of fear, for she is transgressing the limits of acceptability. She is also portrayed completely as a mother; her bare, swelling breasts signify her role as

Following Page: Médée Furieuse, 1862.
a nurturer and caregiver. Her clutching grasp of the boys as she pulls them to her also signals her maternal affection, her inclination toward the children.

Ironically though, this embrace makes evident her violent nature as well. While she does pull them near her, she does so carelessly and abruptly. Their bodies hang awkwardly from her arms, as they twist in different directions. The one's face is buried beneath her arm, while the other's kicking legs and unnatural position testify to the force of her grip. She also grips a dagger, and holds her arm in a position ready to strike. Thus, this pose simultaneously implies maternal affection and frantic violence. She grips them to her, but with the intention of killing them.

The painting captures various emotions and character traits in a single instant, and can do so because it is not compelled to explain. When in the arena of the written word, contradictory statements or descriptions seem either wrong, or they call for an explanation. In art, the work stands on its own, without words to explain why this mother is killing her children. While we as observers might try to apply explanations to a work, it does not require them. Without verbal clarifications Delacroix's work stands as a representation of one moment, in which a woman, a mother, is about to kill her children. It is not because she is a sorceress or witch, and not because she considers them not her children, but it just is. The medium of art permits more easily the contradictions of the maternal semiotic, for like the semiotic it is essentially non-verbal.

Even within this "non-verbal" mode of expression, however, the achievement of an unrestrained presentation of the semiotic is
elusive. In this painting, Delacroix's style is markedly restrained, more so than much of his other work. He foregoes the baroque energy of other pieces and opts instead for marked simplicity. The composition of the work is particularly orderly. Delacroix places the three figures in a strong triangular shape, containing them within a well-defined space. The light focused on this space contrasts with the dark, nearly black shade of the rest of the composition.

By neatly isolating the figures spatially and through illumination, Delacroix in a sense achieves what Corneille or Pizan did: the restraint of Medea's fury. Where in Corneille her sorcery served to temper her rage, here the physical composition of the work isolates and contains Medea and prevents the complete eruption of her violence. Therefore, even within art and its removal from symbolic discourse, hindrances to the expression of the semiotic arise. This is not shocking, for the semiotic is not simply a realm opposed to language; it is not merely language's inverse, emerging when language disappears. The semiotic moves against not only language, but all the systems set up by language, the dichotomy- and difference-based realm we function within and our traditional modes of expression. The enigma of the semiotic is inescapable, and haunts us in our efforts to pin it down. While it might emerge more fully in this painting, it is in no way in full prominence.

**William Wetmore Story's Medea**

Sculpture, like painting, is also a fitting mode of expression to encompass the seemingly irreconcilable elements of the semiotic, yet brings up the same difficulties as painting. The particular sculpture
I'd like to address here is that of William Wetmore Story, an American painter of the mid-nineteenth century. Story studied at Harvard and later in Italy, and worked across the boundaries of the arts. He wrote poetry and drama, but received most recognition for his work in sculpture. His most well-received works were those of famous women, including Cleopatra, Dahlila, and Medea.

His Medea is a larger than life size, imposing figure, clenching a dagger in one hand. The other is raised to her chin, as if in serious reflection. Her bowed head and fierce glare hint at the monstrosity of the act she is about to commit. Like Delacroix, Story selects the moment before the murder to depict, a moment ripe with emotions and passion. This is the instant in which all of Medea's experience thus far culminates; her scorn for Jason, her envy of Creusa, and her love for her sons all meet here, as she ultimately decides to commit the murders.

Story makes the most of this moment, as did Delacroix, and presents the many contradictions Medea embodies. One interesting pair of qualities that Story emphasizes is masculinity and femininity. Although she wears jewelry and a woman's dress, this Medea's features are noticeably masculine. Her face is angular, with a long, sharply defined nose and straight, strong lips. The masculine details of her appearance evenly balance the aspects of her femininity. Through this pairing of characteristics, Story introduces an additional complexity to Medea's character.

Story captures her complicated nature in depicting her as both violent and thoughtful, in the same way that Delacroix portrayed her.

Figure 91. William Wetmore Story, Medea
maternity and violence. Her overall pose contrasts greatly with her facial expression. The placement of her arms, one relaxed across her hips and the other raised to her chin, suggests serious reflection, as if she is pondering whether or not she will commit the act. Her cruel scowl however, implies that she is a woman bent on vengeance, who will not be swayed. Thus, in juxtaposing these differing qualities, Story evokes the contradictory nature of Medea that so many writers tend to shy away from.

However, Joy Kasson sees in this sculpture the same act of taming that I uncovered in Pizan's, Corneille's, and Carlos Morton's Medeas. In her book *Marble Queens and Captives*, she argues that because Story portrays Medea on the brink of committing her act, and does not actually depict the murder, this work manifests "Story's special talent for evoking, only to deny, the possibility of woman's demonic power" (218). She also interprets Medea's glowering expression as one of passive contemplation, rather than anger or vengeant plotting. In her interpretation, Story has dramatically restrained Medea's power.

The disparity of our analyses highlights first of all the relativity of interpretation; each reading is admittedly affected by the position and motives of the interpreter. This divergence brings out as well, however, the difficulty in seeking out an expression of the semiotic. The attempt to understand the semiotic is a complicated endeavor, and not one to be solved by simply looking to art. In art as in text, the semiotic can be suppressed and ignored. Kasson, in looking at Story's sculpture, found that one aspect of the semiotic, rage, had been subdued and contained. Her interpretation
does stem from the motive of arguing that "nineteenth century audiences responded positively" to works that "simultaneously provoked anxiety and offered reassurance about the nature of female identity" (Kasson 232). However, her reading of the sculpture reaffirms the possibility for denial of the semiotic within art.

**Cherubini: Music and Meaning**

Music, in its distinctive differences from the visual arts, particularly in the combination of music and text characteristic of opera, offers the possibility of a new look at the semiotic and how and where it emerges. In fact, Kristeva, when writing about art's effect on symbolic discourse, writes specifically of music's power to transform signification. When text and music are paired, the relationship between semiotic and symbolic changes the functioning of language: "Language thus tends to be drawn out of its symbolic function (sign-syntax) and is opened out within a semiotic articulation; with a material support such as the voice, this semiotic network gives 'music' to literature" (*RPL* 113).

Musicality ultimately alters the functioning of the symbolic, and enacts an opening up of meaning. While she refers specifically to poetic language, the same applies even more appropriately to words accompanied by music. In Cherubini's opera, as we shall see, the possibilities for meaning unfold interminably. As Kristeva asserts, "No text, no matter how 'musicalized', is devoid of meaning or signification; on the contrary, musicalization pluralizes meanings" (*RPL* 116). Like the semiotic, in which the signifier-signified relationship is not yet conceived, music allows for innumerable
significations.

Cherubini's text allows us to see how words written expressly for musical accompaniment differ from other texts. In such situations, music accounts for and creates much of the meaning, so the words themselves have less weight. This can be seen even in the traditional printing of an opera's text, where "etc." often replaces parts of dialogue. The individual words become less crucial, while the overall tone and intention remain. The continual repetition of exact lines also attests to this lessening of the importance of the text. Creon, for instance, in the second act, repeats the line "Go away! Leave my kingdom! Nothing can break my will!" in various permutations. The literal meaning of these words fades in significance, for they are intended to be paired with music.

Music does add meaning that the text is not adequate to convey, as several of the main arias testify. Two of the most strikingly emotional moments are Medea's aria in the first act "Dei tuoi figli la madre," and in the third act, "E che? Io son Medea!" In Maria Callas' stunning performance, the depth of emotion conveyed by the combination of text and music is vastly greater than any reading of the words alone could be.

In the first act, in the aria "Dei tuoi figli la madre," Medea begs Jason to return to her, recalling the days when they were happily in love. She implores his pity, crying, "The mother of your children you see defeated and distressed, made wretched by you." The overall message is one of defeat and dependence; this is a woman who has been completely destroyed by her husband's betrayal of her, and whose only hope is his return. In the accompaniment, rhythms, and
emphases in voice, however, the anger behind these pleas of helplessness emerges.

Throughout the aria, for example, the strong emphasis placed on the word "crude" or cruel, makes this more of a threatening accusation than a cry of defeat. The previous line, "You know how much she loved you," is lilting and slightly drawn out. The word crude then, is separated, high, and sharply defined. The orchestra echoes with a staccato punch of equal emphasis. The distinction this word receives musically from the rest of the aria brings out the anger that is almost completely submerged beneath her resignation. The accusation is repeated several times, and in each instance stands out clearly from the other lines in emphasis and tone.

Within this aria of mostly smooth, slow entreaties, there are other outbreaks of anger as well that are brought out only through metalinguistic elements. When Medea remembers, "I was happy then, I had a father, a cozy home, I gave everything up for you," Callas' tone as well as the orchestral accompaniment accentuate her anger. The notes are higher and more harshly emphasized, and the music as well is characterized by deep, resounding emphases that greatly contrast the preceding flowing violin strains. While the words alone convey helplessness, the music contributes varying emotions, in the form of the anger that eventually impels the murders.

Medea resolves to commit these murders in the final aria of the third act, in which the combination of music and text is also extremely moving. Here the music brings out even more fully the diversity of competing passions within Medea's character. Because of
the rapid changes in speed and tone, the emotion changes with almost every line. The introductory cello strains are deep and foreboding, leading into Medea's sinister "What then? I am Medea and I let them live? What happened?" The music then becomes softer with her pensive "Yet they are mine too!" The long violin strains here stress the affection in Callas' voice. They are broken, however, with the high, quickly ascending "But even if they are my children, Jason is still their father!" This is accentuated by sharp accents and then a descending run which emphasizes her anger. With the addition of the music, the plurality of passions and meanings emerges as Medea contemplates this action.

Music, like art, takes us beyond the realm of the purely linguistic, and allows elements of the semiotic to be more truly expressed. Through music, the sometimes conflicting elements of Medea's character are expressed almost simultaneously, and allowed to coexist. She is at once resigned and embittered, or affectionate yet hardened and violent. Where in text such pairs tended to be lessened or avoided, the pairing of text with music allows more freedom in expressing them.

This multiplicity of meanings, however, does not directly imply true expression of the semiotic. Just as the semiotic is not simply the absence of language, nor is it merely the juxtaposition of many different feelings. While this type of emotional swaying is typical of the semiotic's upsurges, any such rhythm is not necessarily one of these occurrences. For this study, the crucial aspects of the semiotic are those in which violence and rage are "acceptable" or at least compatible with motherhood.
The final aria in fact betrays this pairing. Medea herself removes her essential identity and her acts from the realm of motherhood: "Wretched woman! How can you think of being a mother?" she says, "... How ever can you feel the delight of a mother, the delight of being a mother in your heart?" This desire for removal is betrayed by the music as well. While Medea speaks of running away to save the children, the music mirrors this running, with repeated ascending cello runs. However, when Medea once again hardens herself to commit the murders, the running in the accompaniment continues and exposes her lingering desire to remove herself and save the children. The murders and motherhood exclude each other, never existing as fully compatible. The character of Medea herself feels this and expresses her discomfort with their pairing.

Music can and does allow fuller expression of the semiotic than language, as do both painting and sculpture. In the reliance on less verbal forms of expression the semiotic emerges more easily. However, this is not to say that there is no sublimation of the semiotic within these modes. In all three genres, evidence of suppression of the motherhood-violence couple arose. Looking at the semiotic with particular regard for motherhood and violence introduces an interesting dilemma; an aversion toward the pairing of these qualities seems almost inevitable. Can this aversion be avoided at all?

The difficulty of coupling motherhood with violence persistently hangs over portrayals of Medea. Artists, both male and female, from different periods and places have struggled with the
combination and shown a tendency to suppress it. While we might shy away from the semiotic naturally to some extent, this is magnified when looking primarily at violence. It becomes too easy to equate violence with the semiotic, and to then label certain instances as avoidance of the semiotic which are really manifestations of our aversion toward violence. I had been looking for affirmations of Medea's violence, works which portrayed her violence along with her motherhood and femininity. While some works do so to a greater degree than others, the denial of her violence is not simply evidence of our suppression of the semiotic. It speaks of our society's views of womanhood, femininity, and violence itself, issues which are related to the semiotic but which do not alone define it.

Additionally, it is misleading to search for clear, unambiguous portrayals of the semiotic. I had been hoping to discover a medium most suitable for this, and while art and music do seem more appropriate, they are certainly not perfect in this respect. The semiotic carries with it an inherent enigma; we must accept this difficulty and affirm it as part of the semiotic. In seeking to understand Kristeva's _héréthique_ and its relation to the semiotic, it is not necessary (or even possible) to transform the pre-verbal realm into something ordinary or everyday. I had been searching for a definitive expression of the semiotic, something simply infeasible.

While the search for a tangible, unaffected instance of the semiotic is in vain, the effort to understand how the semiotic might contribute to Kristeva's herethics is not at all fruitless. The semiotic's influences are erratic and difficult to label, but as in many of the
works studied here, not completely elusive. Recognizing these semiotic instants and moments is essential in incorporating the semiotic and symbolic, and in developing an ethics that recognizes the power of the semiotic. In so doing we may eventually diminish the "embarrassing and inevitable problematics of the law" by "giving it flesh, language, jouissance" (SM 262). The question remains, however, of how we are to fully perceive the semiotic, and how its influence can be best understood. While the inclusion of music and the arts adds to the study, it is not a conclusive solution and leaves much to be explained.

We must then turn to the question of how to use what evidence we have of the semiotic. How can we use art and music to contribute to a shift in our ways of thinking about motherhood? How can we weigh further aspects of the semiotic alongside violence? And most importantly, how can we consider the needs and demands of women in a way that allows us to more fully talk about and conceive of motherhood? While these questions still remain, they are not beyond our grasp. We must continually make ourselves more open to the swirlings and contradictory aspects of the semiotic, to allow ourselves freedom of expression and to find a way to use the semiotic in ourselves . . .
Works Cited


Works Consulted


