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MESSING WITH THE GODS or How I revisited Medea

In Greece, we have a long-held tradition called "don't mess with tradition." An idea that applies especially to our history and cultural heritage, and in essence means "Do not change the narrative that's been agreed on by some brilliant minds some centuries ago. Even if it makes no sense." The Greek Revolution, the Greek Civil War, the extinction of the Jewish communities during WWII, the Greek Junta, are topics that still hurt and thus should not be explored in-depth, neither by historians nor artists. "Not yet." Another thing—we, as Greeks, are too respectful with is our Ancient Greek Masters. Their words are like the Holy Bible to us, words you are not allowed to doubt publicly, let alone initiate a conversation with or offer another perspective. Playwrights around the world have written innumerable new versions of Medeas, Oedipuses, Electras but we, Greeks, obey religiously to the aforementioned rule.

Last year I was commissioned to do the exact opposite: revisit the old myth of Medea and have it staged in the same place where Euripides' Medea first premiered. Having studied Medea for years, I never found a sufficient explanation for this heroine's actions. The narrative around Medea goes like this: she's madly in love, she's jealous, she's Barbarian. So, she kills her two children, her husband's wife, and the wife's father. Who hasn't? Even though I know motherhood, marriage, and betrayal myself, I could never—as a woman—relate to these actions. At school, they teach us not to take these characters literally as they're not human. They are either gods or of gods' descendants. Since nowadays gods have died, in my version, I had no option but to treat this heroine as "just" a woman.

I did not intend by any means to be disrespectful to Euripides, not even for the fun of it. What felt more urgent was to pay tribute to a woman who was irreparably hurt, in the same way many women around me, before me, in my community, my small village, have been. To explore this, I started with the first thing that comes to my mind when I hear the word woman. It is a simple phrase: "I rue the day that you two were born as women."

It was something my mother often said to my sister and me, always in a voice thick with rage, never with any explanation. I didn't understand. I was incredibly proud that we'd been born women. We were capable of so many things that men weren't—and I had living examples. I was growing up surrounded by them. As a woman, you were capable of the miracles of a holy martyr; you could tamp down your egotism, love more than you were loved, endure betrayal with resignation, stand the pains of childbirth, of daily care for others, of being abandoned. I was being raised by women who had themselves been raised with lives of saints and whole villages of eyes around them, watching their every move, eager for them to take a wrong step or stumble.

From the first time I ever read *Medea*, I imagined a village of eyes like that around her. Between the lines, I could feel that eye lurking, the eye that tells a woman how to carry her body and emotions, how to mutilate them on the altar of social cohesion. An eye whose functioning the heroine herself had accepted years ago, had internalized, had learned to see through.

In Medea, I see a woman with a grievance, not a woman in love. And that grievance arises because the eye inside her has just closed. After she is betrayed and told to leave, she no longer has a role to play.

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She's been sacrificing herself for so many years in order to belong—but those sacrifices earned her none of the things that belonging brings. Now all that's left of her is a woman, plain and simple, at a time when female identity is always defined in connection with someone else: daughter, wife, mother. And she's now coming to realize what that sacrifice meant. Its cost of sweat and blood. Its futility. The eye is closed, and Medea is seeing it—from the outside, with her own eyes—for the first time.

We too have begun to see it over these past few years, as women acquire the voice and courage to unveil injustice. Society's lining is coming undone, and the underlying structure is being revealed—built by men but oppressive towards both sexes. What wasn't possible for us to say or even see was that the backbone of society was exclusively female: built of silence, endurance, and loads of guilt. To my mind, from scene to scene, my heroine is experiencing the same revelation we're all now living through the things we thought it was our obligation—even our pride to endure was from the start oppressive, painful, and irrational—because our experience as women was written and dictated by male eyes, minds, and hands.

However, the male hand of Euripides in 431 BCE writes in the first stasimon of his *Medea* how the muses (or, according to other translators, the songs) of the old poets will die: female characters will no longer be maligned but will instead be honored by their writer-creators. Other phrases from this stasimon: “But my [woman's] life will sound loud and change people's minds” and “Phoebus Apollo [...] baptizes the first female poet.” Is Euripides saying that women are now taking over the narration of their own experience? The answer depends on the translation, but this is precisely how I interpret the social unrest today: as a changing of the guard regarding who will narrate human events from now on. If everything has already been said, it can still be said all over again from another point of view: the female. And if some people are afraid that, if the narrator changes, the story will, too. Well, they're right to be afraid, but this is the only way to achieve a complete, thus useful account of the human condition.