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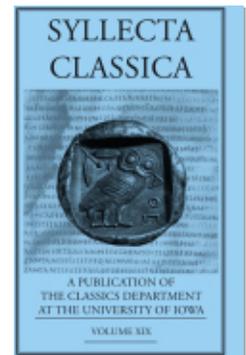
The Medea Project for Incarcerated Women: Liberating Medea

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THE MEDEA PROJECT FOR INCARCERATED WOMEN: LIBERATING MEDEA

NANCY SORKIN RABINOWITZ

Abstract: From the late twentieth and into the early twenty-first century, productions of Greek tragedy have been comparatively frequent; many of them use tragedy as a way to think through contemporary problems from a politically progressive point of view. In this essay, I look at Rhodessa Jones' Medea Project as one example of these political uses of tragedy. Jones works with incarcerated women in the San Francisco jails; her workshops culminate in public performances at theatrical venues in the city. The essay asks whether and how theater can be politically effective.*

POLITICAL THEATER

In major U.S. and European cities, performances of Greek plays have become relatively common since the late twentieth century. They are also often used in political ways. As Edith Hall pointed out, 1968 marked a turning point. Before then, productions “rarely challenged mainstream political ideology, or indeed the performance traditions of western naturalism, but there were exceptions” (1). In fact, Greek tragedy seems to be a way for us to think through current problems. For instance, in the wake of U.S. attacks on Iraq, productions of Trojan War plays, especially the *Trojan Women* and *Hecuba*, were given Iraqi settings.¹ Greek plays are being reproduced to critique American policy—Greek soldiers may be given Southern accents, or a reference may be made to “coalition forces” to bring the point home that the U.S. is in an imperialist position.² Robert Auletta's version of Aeschylus' *Persians*, produced

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¹ Loraux makes a similar point about France (11). For specific and immediate responses to the attacks on the World Trade Center in relation to tragedy, see Romain; Rabinowitz 2005; 2008, 184–89.

² Terry Eagleton argues that the Left has been suspicious of Greek tragedy (xxvi); nonetheless, Greek plays have often been staged with a progressive political agenda in

after the first Gulf War, achieved new status when the current Iraq War began; the Lysistrata Project orchestrated stagings of the Aristophanes play around the globe to protest the war; more recently, we have seen the launching of the Philoctetes Project, which aims to bring attention to the way veterans of this same war are treated when they return home. The Philoctetes Project first organized a series of staged readings in New York City, which facilitated a public conversation about health care, chronic illness, and veterans.³ In August 2008, the plays *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* were used by the U.S. Marine Corps in a conference organized to address the psychological costs of combat. Actor David Straithairn and others were struck by the relevance of the ancient texts: “I know it’s a bit odd to have Greek plays read to a conference of military people, but you read these plays and you understand they are the first investigations into the condition of war in Western civilization” (*New York Times*, August 14, 2008).

MEDEA AS MYTH AND TEXT

In the mythic background, which is alluded to in the play, Medea is marked as a woman, a non-Greek, and a demigod. She is a grandchild of Helios, as well as the daughter of Aietes, the possessor of the Golden Fleece, which Jason needs in order to be restored to his throne in Iolchos. When Jason comes to Colchis on the Argo to steal the fleece, Medea falls in love with him, enables him to win the prize, and facilitates his escape (and her own). On reaching Iolchos, she persuades the daughters of Pelias that she can make their father immortal; when they follow her instructions, however, he dies. The pair must flee again. When they arrive at Corinth, Jason takes a new bride, and as Euripides’ play opens, Medea is about to be sent into exile with their children because of the threats she has been making against the royal family. She ultimately executes a complicated revenge, killing the new bride, her father Creon as collateral damage, and her own children with Jason. In the wake of the Euripidean treatment, infanticide has come to define Medea, but there were other versions of the story in which the Corinthians killed

mind. For example, Sartre’s 1965 version of *Trojan Women* was a response to French occupation of Algeria and to the war in Vietnam as well, according to Loraux (8–9).

³ <<http://www.thephiloctetesproject.blogspot.com>>.

the boys because of their part in her plot, or in which they died because her plan to render them immortal misfired.⁴

Feminist criticism has strongly influenced political analyses of *Medea*, and such readings, for obvious reasons, tend to center on gender. Medea is, after all, the quintessential example of a woman wronged. The text explicitly raises questions about the status of women. At the play's opening, Medea is inside the house, the proper place for an Athenian woman. Hearing her cries, the chorus requests that she come outside, offering to support her with their sympathy (173–79).⁵ When she emerges, Medea makes an apology for not having appeared previously; she speaks in terms that are more appropriate perhaps to a male, Athenian citizen, saying that she might have seemed haughty, *σεμνός* (216, 214–17); she then goes on to emphasize her status as a woman, and the suffering of women in general. Medea's speech to the women of Corinth is often cited, out of context to be sure, as an analysis of women's lives in ancient Athens: "Of all those creatures having breath and thought, we women are most miserable," (*Πάντων δ' ὅσ' ἔμψυχα καὶ γνώμην ἔχει / γυναικὲς ἔσμεν ἀθλιώτατον φύτον* 230–31). The speech proceeds to detail what makes a woman so miserable: she first has to buy a husband, who is "a master over her body" (*δεσπότην τε σώματος* 233); if she finds a good husband, she still has to learn how to get along with him; if all of this works out, then a woman's life is enviable, "but if not, we must die" (*εἰ δὲ μή, θανεῖν χρεῶν* 243). Finally, men have other options for company, but women "have to look to one only" (*ἀνάγκη πρὸς μίαν ψυχὴν βλέπειν* 247). Having offered sympathy initially, the chorus reiterates its support; on the basis of their shared gender, the women agree to keep silent when Medea exacts her vengeance (267). They retreat from that complicity only when it becomes clear to them that Medea will take revenge by killing her children.

Another political reading, one that emphasizes the treatment of the Other, has been based on Medea's position as an outsider to Hellenic civilization. This slant—Medea as barbarian and a witch—is also well-documented through performance history.⁶ From the beginning,

⁴ For details, see Mastronarde 50–53; Gantz 340–73.

⁵ J. Diggle, ed.

⁶ Macintosh 7–29; on imperialism and colonialism, see Hall 23–24.

the distance between Medea's origins and her current location are emphasized; the nurse begins by wishing that the Argo had never come between the clashing rocks to Colchis (1–2). Medea is identified as a Colchian, a barbarian, brought to Greece because she has fallen in love with Jason. Throughout the play, her barbarian status is toyed with. Herodotus tells us that the Colchians were woolly haired and descended from Ethiopians (2.104), so we can infer that Medea was black in some versions of the myth, although there is no indication in Euripides' text that she is non-white. Wetmore discusses racialized productions of *Medea*, including *The Medea Project* (147–204); in her introduction to the play, Blondell also refers to the significance of race in Euripides.⁷ Jason emphasizes Medea's barbarian background when he asserts all the advantages of Hellenic civilization that he has given her:

Μεῖζω γε μέντοι τῆς ἐμῆς σωτηρίας
 εἰληφας ἢ δέδωκας, ὡς ἐγὼ φράσω.
 Πρῶτον μὲν Ἑλλάδ' ἀντὶ βαρβάρου χθονὸς
 γαίαν κατοικεῖς καὶ δίκην ἐπίστασαι
 νόμοις τε χρῆσθαι μὴ πρὸς ἰσχύος χάριν·
 πάντες δέ σ' ἤισθοντ' οὐσαν Ἑλληνες σοφὴν
 καὶ δόξαν ἔσχες· εἰ δὲ γῆς ἐπ' ἐσχάτοις
 ὄροισιν ὤικεις, οὐκ ἄν ἦν λόγος σέθεν. (534–41)

In return for my salvation
 You got more than you gave, as I shall make clear.
 First, you inhabit Greek soil instead of a barbarian land
 And you understand justice and can use the laws
 instead of force.
 All the Greeks have heard that you are clever
 And you have reputation; if you lived at
 The farthest borders of the earth, there would be no
 word of you.

At the end of the play, Jason claims that the form of Medea's revenge reveals that she is a barbarian, stating famously that “there is no Greek woman who would have dared to do these things” (οὐκ ἔστιν ἥτις τοῦτ' ἄν Ἑλληνίς γυνὴ / ἔτλη ποθ' 1339–40).

Finally, we must also consider her not only as a woman “wronged” and an outsider, but also as a demi-god. As a descendant of the Sun,

⁷ See also Warner 2001, citing Blondell.

Medea may have had some magical powers, and the jewels and dress she gives the princess are from him. Her magic is downplayed, however, in Euripides' version so that her plot seems to be much more the result of her status as woman and outsider (Mastronarde 25), until the moment of her escape, which is engineered by the Sun god; his chariot places her out of Jason's reach and makes her untouchable.

In a production that toured in 2002, the director and lead actor found general political significance to the play. Fiona Shaw, who played Medea, said in an interview after the one-year anniversary of the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001: "Two years ago, we lived in a world where Greek tragedy had to justify its position, but that has changed now... It is like what people lived last year" (Fricker 6). Deborah Warner, the director, said that she sees the *Medea* as a play "about the tragedy of someone who is pushed to the place where she has no choice" (Fricker 7). Thus, despite the fact that the production was very domestic in its presentation of Jason and Medea,⁸ it had a potentially political meaning; in the context of suicide bombings, Medea's willingness to hurt herself in order to get revenge may take on the coloring of its surroundings (as was the case, for instance, in the case of the RSC production of *Hecuba* in 2005).

In a separate interview, Warner further affirmed that: "We desperately need Greek plays. We need them when democracies are wobbly" (Fricker 7). Why do we need them, though? In *Despoiled Landscapes, Medeamaterial, Landscapes with Argonauts*, Heiner Müller makes the connections between the Argonauts and the destruction of the environment. In an interview, Müller said that he saw "Jason's story as the earliest myth of colonization in Greek legend: 'Jason is slain by his boat... European history began with colonization... That the vehicle of colonization strikes the colonizer dead anticipates the end of it. That's the threat of the end we're facing, the 'end of growth'" (Müller 124). Müller, however, is not optimistic about the political efficacy of theater: "*Landscape with Argonauts* presumes the catastrophes which mankind is working toward. The theatre's contribution to their prevention can only be their representation" (Müller 126). What role does performance play? What work can it do?

⁸ Daniel Mendelsohn reviewed the Deborah Warner production, complaining about its domesticity. He quotes the Fricker interview, but says "all the more unfortunate, then, that none of this political awareness informs her production" (29).

THE MEDEA PROJECT

Is there a way in which modern performances of ancient drama, or any drama, can be actively liberating, despite Müller's skepticism? I see that potential in prison initiatives such as the Medea Project: Theater for Incarcerated Women.⁹ The work of Paulo Freire on education and Augusto Boal on theater are both relevant here. Freire focuses on the right to literacy as a human right; furthermore, he articulates the potential education has to develop critical consciousness and thus to liberate. Most important is the connection to *doing*: "Critical consciousness is brought about not through an intellectual effort alone, but through praxis—through the authentic union of action and reflection" (61). Freire worked in a Latin American setting with very poor people, and, as a man who had been exiled and imprisoned, he was very familiar with the problems of dictatorship (49, 59, etc.). Part of his point is that finding a voice is an essential element for asserting power against domination, which has been enforced through language, among other devices. Although Freire speaks routinely of the universal male, his perspective has obvious resonance for feminist criticism, which has traditionally sought to identify women's voices and create space for them to be heard. Freire's attention to segments of the population that have been ignored offers a way to look at women, and in particular incarcerated women.

Boal wrote *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), taking his cue from Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He incorporates the importance of action, arguing that it is not through watching, but through participating that change takes place. Boal defines theater

as language, capable of being utilized by any person with or without artistic talent. We tried to show in practice how the theater can be placed at the service of the oppressed, so that they can express themselves and so that, by using this new language, they can also discover new concepts. (1979, 121)

He is very clear about the participatory requirement: "one must keep in mind its main objective: to change the people—'spectators,' passive beings

⁹ For another example, see *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, available on DVD, which recounts a performance project at Lockett Correctional Complex. I am not considering Fugard's version of *Antigone* in *The Island*, which, though wonderful, is a play about a performance of Sophocles' *Antigone* in a prison.

in the theatrical phenomenon—into subjects, into actors, transformers of the dramatic action” (122). So, in the Medea Project, women change, not by watching the plays, but by performing them: they are spect-actors, to cite Boal (1996, 24).

Freire and Boal write in a third world context and from an avowedly anti-colonialist perspective. They are relevant to the U.S. in particular because the U.S. is an imperial power with colonized internal populations (racial minorities in particular). The prison system in the U.S. can be seen as one way in which capitalism has created a colonized population within the nation. The United States incarcerates the greatest number of people in the world (2.3 million), and at the highest rate (762 out of every 100,000 people).¹⁰ The statistics for people of color in prison are even worse.¹¹ The problem was reported in the *New York Times* on April 22, 2008 with this headline: “Prison Population Around the Globe: The United States has the highest incarceration rate and largest number of criminals behind bars,” though this was, of course, not news to those who have long been concerned about prison populations in the U.S.

Education has a significant positive impact on the prison population, reducing rates of recidivism by as much as 100% (that is, improving on the 55% rate for the general prison population to 0% for those who earned a bachelor’s degree).¹² Yet at the same time that numbers of black men and women incarcerated, many for non-violent drug crimes, have increased, education programs in prison systems have disappeared: “All but eight of the 350 college programs in prisons were closed nationwide” (Clough and Fine 35). Efforts have been made to replace the missing degree programs through consortia with colleges.

Theater professionals as well as educators have attempted to address the situation. Cultural Odyssey was founded by Idris Ackamoor in 1979;

¹⁰ <http://hrw.org/doc/?t=global_prisons>.

¹¹ 170/100,000 whites; 276/100,000 hispanic, 815/100,000 non-hispanic blacks (Bureau of Justice Statistics 2007).

¹² A study at Folsom Prison in California showed that none of the inmates who earned a bachelor’s degree recidivated, compared with the 55% recidivism rate of the rest of the released inmates. A study authored by female inmates at New York’s Bedford Hills Correctional Facility indicates that women who attended college while incarcerated recidivated at a rate of 7.7% as opposed to the 29.9% return rate of women who did not attend.

Rhodesa Jones joined him as co-artistic director in 1983. According to their website, they have developed over a dozen original productions that demonstrate their vision of “arts as social activism.” The Medea Project is one part of that larger project. It adopts “a visionary model for using art to transform a population in-need” (“Cultural Odyssey”). The program developed from a residency that Jones first held at the San Francisco Jail in 1989, when she teamed up with Sean Reynolds, a social worker doing assertiveness training in the prison at the same time (Fraden 42–43). Since then, Jones has been working with women in the San Bruno and San Francisco County Jails. Jones and Reynolds run a several-month program that culminates in public performances at major San Francisco theaters—the first one, in 1992, called *Reality Is Just Outside the Window*, was loosely based on Euripides’ *Medea*. The Medea Project continues to stage productions (generally based on myth and legend) in San Francisco at regular intervals (seven so far). As a performance artist, Jones also tours and presents work that was developed with the prisoners and based on their stories.

Jones was partly inspired by a project in a women’s prison in Massachusetts designed by Jean Trounstine. A middle-school teacher at the time, Trounstine did full-scale productions of Shakespearean plays, adapting the texts to make the language more accessible to the audience. Trounstine emphasizes the fact that acting in a play means that you have to walk in someone else’s shoes; in an interview, Trounstine said: “Whereas education allows freedom of thought, drama gives people a way out of their lives, a way to be part of a community, a way to do something together with a group cooperatively that’s bigger than themselves” (2001a). Trounstine stresses the power of the texts; she asserts that the “classic texts belong to everyone” and believes that the effort of mastering Shakespeare teaches the prisoners that “what they consider most difficult can be in reach” (2001b, 209).

There are some interesting differences between the projects. First, Jones puts more stock in the women telling their own stories than in the classical texts themselves. Second, Trounstine’s plays were performed inside the prison for other inmates and only a few outsiders. Trounstine said,

In the beginning, I was able to invite a few outside guests, and I was also in the middle able to invite the prisoners’ families. So there was a time when I was able to have two performances, not

just one. One for the inmates, and one for invited outside people and invited staff. But I never was able to have a play for the public, and in the end, the prison wanted me to call it 'a class project' and not a play because they were afraid they would be seen badly, as soft on crime. (2001a)

The Medea Project's performances are large, public affairs, where the difference between the inside and the outside is momentarily blurred. Trounstine worked with inmates who were incarcerated for long sentences. The women in the San Francisco jails are either awaiting sentencing or will serve less than twelve months. The difference between prison and jail may account for the difference in the kind of performance each project was able to produce. In each case, though, the coordinators are committed to the *process* of putting on the play as a crucial way for the women to change their lives. Behind both projects lies a belief in the power of literature, and especially drama, to change lives; even though they hope to reduce recidivism, however, Jones and Reynolds are aware of how unlikely that is (Warner 2001, 164; Katz). Trounstine is guardedly optimistic about the results; the women she worked with in prison were able to achieve degrees and some measure of success. As she said in an interview,

Of the six women that I focus on in my book, one of them earned her associate degree while in prison, is out, and, at 63 years old, is doing quite well, and says that education helped her 'believe she could be somebody.' Another earned her Associates after prison and is now working on her BA, has a house and a son. A third woman is out and just surviving basically, but doing okay—living, working, not going back to prison. A fourth woman was deported and I don't know how she is, but she's not back in prison. Two of the other women died, one from cancer and one from AIDS. But I think having 50 percent who are having great success and two-thirds having good success is pretty good. (2001a)

Her program, however, is no longer in operation, which points out one of the underlying problems for such ventures.

Both Trounstine and Jones envision a practice for liberation that is in opposition to the conformist goals of the prison system. Jones and her troupe are quite insistent that all the participants must be equally committed for the process to work. For instance, when one woman came back from work furlough and tested positive for drugs, Jones and

the other women would not let her back in the show. The documentary made by Kathy Katz reveals that her compatriots did not blame her or dislike her, but they insisted that she take responsibility for her choice and for the consequences of that choice. She went back to her man and had thus missed the whole point of the play: “Medea killed her children in revenge because she loved a man too much. . . . As women, all of us women, we all love too much” (Katz).

The inspiration for the Medea Project came from stories that Jones heard while working in the jail; one of the women had killed her baby because she was breaking up with its father, and he wanted to take the baby (Fraden 43; Katz); another woman’s child died of crib death in the home of its father—the mother wasn’t there when it happened because she couldn’t “get it together to have a family” as Jones put it (Katz). The other women in jail were “treating her like a pariah” (private conversation); that experience led Jones to think about the character of Medea. She focused on the child killing in the myth, and made the connection to the fact that women in prison were, in effect (through drug usage, abandonment, or the incarceration itself), “killing” their young. In the recording of the workshop process for the show in *Open the Gate*, Reynolds says, “It was not a black version of the myth. Medea runs through the lives of women; we chose to focus on Medea because of the way she interacted with children and men” (Katz). Many women, not just these incarcerated women, love men too much and give their power over to men who run things. According to Reynolds, the incarcerated women are not unlike the wives of presidents in that they “uphold and support the lives of men” (Warner 2001, 164); they need to recognize their own power, and the power of other women. In staging the play, the incarcerated women are claiming themselves, presenting and representing themselves, to show that they are not animals (a stereotype of incarcerated women) but are also women with children. As Jones says in the closing minutes of the documentary *We Just Telling Stories*, they are playing to an audience who thinks they should be locked up. She encourages her troupe to convey the message that they are not that different from people in the audience (Andrews).

When Jones gave the women copies of *Medea*, “she [soon] realized that nobody was reading it. . . . Performing the classic in a classical way just was not going to work” (Fraden 43). There was too much distance between the incarcerated modern women and the ancient play, with its elevated diction and mythic context. When Jones *told* the women the

story, they were fascinated, though still quite hard on Medea—they responded “righteously” (Katz). As facilitator, Jones linked Medea and a slave woman who killed her children rather than let them be enslaved (also the source story for Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*); she then asked,

‘What are the ways we kill our children?’...it stopped them all. Because all of a sudden it’s like, ‘You’re not with your kids. Your baby is somewhere right now dying of a broken heart. That’s real, you know...How are you different from Medea?’ (Fraden 44)

After this discussion, the women wrote their own pieces about their lives and how they connected to the myth. The result was the performance piece *Reality Is Just Outside the Window*, which includes an updated, street-talking Medea in the mini-play, “There Are Women Waiting: The Tragedy of Medea Jackson” (written by Edris Cooper), and texts written by the incarcerated women. All the actors were on the stage the entire time because of their status as prisoners (the sheriff was afraid for their safety, as much as for their security as prisoners). Thus, the material reality of working in a jail dovetailed with the conventional requirements of tragedy. There were salutary results: the chorus members had to listen to the words of others without speaking, and focus fully on someone else’s experience.

Though Medea’s anger and revenge, which cause the death of the children, first leapt out at Jones as the most important similarity to the incarcerated women, there are other points of contact. The story of a wife abandoned for a younger woman is obviously still current. The competition between women for men continues. And though Jones did not explicitly use the cultural difference between the mythic Jason and Medea, race plays an enormous role in the Medea Project’s version—Jason’s new girlfriend is white, and interracial marriage is an element. *Reality* takes place in the projects, Jason is a drug dealer, and race is relevant to every aspect of the day-to-day reality depicted in the play. Race is also central to the conditions of incarceration in the U.S. Women in prison are disproportionately women of color; and as Rena Fraden notes in her book, *Imagining Medea*, women in prison are stereotyped as the barbarian Other.¹³

¹³ Warner makes a similar point, and quotes Sean Reynolds about the economic and political realities surrounding recidivism (2001, 162–63).

Like Euripides, Cooper builds sympathy for Medea. When Medea Jackson speaks to the chorus, they immediately understand what she is talking about, even though she's "not from around here" (Fraden 59). Jones typically emphasizes the similarities between women, not the differences. She repeatedly says to the group as they work together: "We're not that different, are we?" (Andrews, cf. Fraden 79–81). Of course, she and Reynolds are aware that at the end of the day, the women from outside go to their homes, while the women in jail return to their cells; thus, they must maintain a delicate balance between identifying and distinguishing themselves (Warner 2001, 165; Fraden 81).

To stress the similarities between women, the Medea in the performance piece is not a demi-goddess. She does not receive her gifts for the princess from the Sun god, and the poison is not magical. Medea and Jason are drug dealers, and street drugs on the underwear she sends kill the bride:

Crystal, baby, pure and sweet as it was in '66. ... A beautiful teddy and a sexy g-string, soaked in crystal. ... And PCP and heroin and some new shit they got in 1992 most folks don't even know about yet. When they get back from delivering the deadly gifts, we are going to celebrate with some Jim Jones Koolaid. (Fraden 62)

The Cooper/Jones version addresses the cycle of violence by having Medea die and by having her employ the very drugs that often put women in jail in the first place (whether they are using them or holding them for some man) and that are so destructive to communities of color in the United States. Cooper's text does not portray Medea's magical power as a valuable cultural heritage, as Christa Wolf does, for instance, but instead addresses the fact that drugs account for more and more of women's incarcerations.

Moreover, the Euripidean play explicitly relates social and political inequality to poetic inequality. The chorus is aware that only when men stop telling all the stories will women be represented fairly in literature (Eur. *Med.* 410–30, esp. 417). The opening of *Reality Is Just Outside the Window* is a monologue entitled "HCTIB," bitch spelled backwards. The point is that women are not born bitches but become them; the play asks what happened to the women when they were girls that caused them to end up in jail. In the Medea Project, the incarcerated women are not merely characters in someone else's story; by writing and acting

for themselves, they may rewrite the dominant representation of their lives.

There are of course many differences, such as the language and setting, but one plot change is highly significant. Euripides arranges for Medea's escape in a chariot sent by her grandfather, the Sun, which emphasizes her immortal ancestry. Edris Cooper's play within Jones' *Reality Is Just Outside the Window* ends instead with the report of Medea's death. The stage directions indicate that Medea "drops the puppets [her children]. A scream (the sound of glass breaking). Medea is lifted up (or given wings), and throws herself into the women's arms. She is bathed in an eerie spotlight." A voice says: "Medea Jackson. We have a warrant for your arrest." Then we hear the cast saying "Medea, she dead" (Fraden 64).

What does it all mean? The looks on the women's faces are cheerful and the rhythm is snappy and upbeat. Are the other women cheerful because they simply do not care, or because they think she had it coming to her? Perhaps Medea is not really dead; perhaps the women merely claim that she is dead, but hide her or protect her in some way. In the documentary *We Just Telling Stories*, one victim of rape and abuse played dead in order to live (Andrews). Is this the case here? Or, it may be that the mythic Medea is dead, and that a new era is dawning. Fraden asserts that Medea's death leads to a new beginning, when women will be in charge of the telling (64). The final scene is definitely reminiscent of a trust-building exercise that the Project uses, in which a woman is in the center of a close circle and is passed from hand to hand, receiving affirmation. The women forming the circle chant "amen." The documentary shows a woman who accidentally killed her husband and worries about her baby being held and supported by the community of women. She has survived. Perhaps this is the meaning of the similar scene in *Reality Is Just Outside the Window*. It too is about trust and community. If this directorial choice is interpreted in the light of black feminist thought, we see that the community is essential to healing and life—Medea can't survive alone, as she seems to do in Euripides.¹⁴ It may also suggest that this phase of women's lives, the Medea phase of extreme anger and self-punishing vengeance, is over.

¹⁴ In this connection it is significant that, at the beginning of Cooper's play, the chorus members have suggestions for healing Medea that imply a women's community (Fraden 58).

While the Euripidean Medea escapes on a dragon-drawn chariot, thanks to her divine heritage, modern Medeas cannot depend on such assistance. They have to create their own escape routes. In the Medea Project, the prisoners who are in the show become subjects by becoming narrators, by telling their stories. As part of a tradition committed to the rehabilitation of prisoners, the Medea Project's mission is to prevent women from returning to jail. As I said above, formal education has been shown to be effective in this regard (243, note 12), but the Medea Project does not grant degrees. Because it is theater and education based on the radical theories of Boal and Freire, the leaders do not tell, but ask. Freire's main contribution to education theory was the idea that education is a dialogue and that the "student" is not empty, waiting to be filled up. Rather, teachers show students what they already know; and they learn something in turn. Boal remarks that in Forum Theatre, "you have to have a protagonist, but you don't have a solution. The solution has to be discovered together, with all of us pedagogically teaching one another" (1996, 25). Thus, Jones draws stories out of the women instead of simply recounting myths to them. Jones, however, is not doing Forum Theatre, *per se*; indeed, Jones is most definitely the director and is most definitely in charge. She often delivers "rants," for instance, which push the women to stay present and engaged in the process (Fraden 88–94; Katz). While she elicits the women's stories from them, the performance piece, *Reality Is Just Outside the Window*, is shaped by her.

It is not in the revision of Euripides that this project is most radical, but in the process of putting together the show. Jones' work is situated at the crossroads of education and politics; it is part social work and part therapy. She insists that in order to get on with their lives, the workshop participants must confront their pasts even if it is painful. She pushes them hard, making them go to the sore places and revisit their pain, which often involves abuse by family members or mothers who blame the victims, such as one woman who was locked out and kicked out into the streets of the Tenderloin District in San Francisco (Andrews).

By having the group members participate in certain activities, Jones can effect psychological changes and perhaps longer-lasting social ones. For instance, in the kick dance, the participants release rage without hurting anyone else; in the matrilineage, women stand up and name their mothers, grandmothers, and their own children. The prisoners make the claim to be somebody, somebody important, not someone to be thrown away. When one woman rushed through the process, Sean Reynolds,

speaking sharply, told her to slow down, that this was “very, very, very important. I am Sean, goddamn it. Pay attention. I am somebody. Please name them so that we will not forget” (Andrews). As Warner points out, and the video by Katz shows, there is a ritual component to Jones’ approach; these repeated actions, intoned with feeling, have the effect of a sacrament enacted by the group (2001, 165).

Although Jones repeatedly says in interviews with Fraden that theater saved her life and that she hopes to save the lives of the women she works with, like Trounstine and Müller, she is aware of the limited effect of art. It can raise consciousness, but it alone cannot make political change. Simply participating in these plays will not make a long term difference in the lives of the incarcerated women, even if they do grow in self-awareness and take responsibility for themselves. Reynolds and Jones are not kidding themselves: the cards are stacked against young, black, uneducated women with criminal records and histories of drug use. Getting and keeping a job is difficult, and many of those released are pulled back into drugs by the people they used to know. The system is complicit in this regard, since the women are often released at night, with inadequate plans or support for them when they get out. With no place to go but the streets, many of them will probably be back on the streets (Warner 2004, 489). Without substantial changes in the criminal justice system, rates of drug use, and instances of domestic violence, nothing will happen.

Boal was guardedly optimistic about the possibilities of liberation from his street work; he said “Perhaps the theater is not revolutionary in itself; but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!” (1979, 155). Dealing with an incarcerated population is different from dealing even with the abject poverty and political oppression that Boal confronted. Nonetheless, relationships are formed that may nurture the possibility of resistance to the current dominant order. First, as we have seen, within the prison, the women become a “we,” a team, a community. As individuals, they are able to give voice to their experiences in a safe space, and later they do so in public. The performance gives the women a tremendous affirmation. And there are follow-up meetings with Jones and Reynolds after the performance ends; in addition, Fraden’s interviews with some participants indicate that they keep in touch with former inmates who may be struggling on the outside (Fraden, 135–78).

But, just as importantly, there is the potential impact on the audience—in talking with me, Jones used the term “public communion” with

an audience that “thinks it knows something about women in prison, thinks women should be shut down.” When faced with federal cuts in prison education programs, anyone who wishes to make a change in prison life or prisoners’ lives must find the money for education elsewhere. By moving the audience to critical thought and then perhaps to action, the Medea Project may be able to do something to change that situation.¹⁵

When Hamilton College invited Jones to do a performance of “Big Butt Girls” in 2004, she brought the inmates’ experiences to those of us in the audience; she regularly performs around the world and tries to inspire audiences to take action. After the performance at Hamilton, for example, there was a workshop on prison activism that moved some of us in the audience to attempt to develop a prison-education project at Hamilton. Since there was a faculty-staff campus organization (the Kirkland Project for the Study of Gender, Society and Culture) committed to social justice, it seemed an ideal use of resources. That program did not come to fruition; but the seeds were planted, and at the time of this writing, there is a new prison-education initiative at Hamilton. Whether or not we manage to create a program, this is the kind of effect that the Medea Project can have. So, can theater effect social change? Yes and no. It can transform the actors, giving them insight into their lives, though it cannot prevent their return to prison. And it can affect the audiences. On Broadway, or in the West End in London, or in San Francisco, where the Medea Project performs, audiences have money. What will we do with our money and time? Can we be moved to action? That is up to us.

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¹⁵ Warner also ends with the audience, but her emphasis is on the imagination (2004, 507–8).

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