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The Bad Mothers: Medea-Myths and National Discourse in Texts from Elisabeth Langgässer and Christa Wolf

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153

Writing against Boundaries

Nationality, Ethnicity and Gender in the German-speaking Context

Editors

Barbara Kosta and Helga Kraft

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CONTENTS

Introduction: Writing against Boundaries 1
BARBARA KOSTA
HELGA KRAFT

"Only Germany raises real men for the world": Richard Wagner's *Ring des Nibelungen*, Nation, and the Third Reich 9
MONIKA SCHAUSTEN

Exile and Nation, Body and Gender in the Works of Talvj (1797-1870) 29
MARTHA KAARSBERG WALLACH

The "New Woman" as a Foreigner: Individual and National Identity in Annette Kolb's novel *Das Exemplar* 39
VIVIAN LISKA

Narratives of Nomadism or Copying German Culture 47
CLAUDIA BREGER

Symptomatic Bodies: Fascism, Gender and Hans Bellmer's Dolls 61
SUSANNE BAACKMANN

Murderous Boundaries: Nation, Memory and Austria's Fascist Past in Elfriede Jelinek's *Stecken, Stab und Stangl* 81
BARBARA KOSTA

A Turkish-German Odyssey: Aras Ören's *Eine verspätete Abrechnung oder Der Aufstieg der Gündoğdus* 99
ELIZABETH LOENTZ

Staging Xenophobia in the 1990s: The Political Plays of Bettina Fless, Anna Langhoff, and Emine Sevgi Özdamar 113
HELGA W. KRAFT

The Bad Mothers: Medea-Myths and National Discourse in Texts from Elisabeth Langgässer and Christa Wolf 131
INGE STEPHAN

Searching for a Motherland: Women Breaking Their Generational Chains in Christa Wolf's *Kindheitsmuster, Sommerstück, and Medea. Stimmen* 141
HELGA W. KRAFT

The Body as Exile in the Works of Irene Dische 167
ELKE LIEBS

New German Cinema's Boundaries Opened: Postmodern Authorship and Nationality in Monika Treut's Films of the 1980s 177
ANDREA REIMANN

Bibliography and Filmography 197

Contributors to this Volume 213

Index 217

The Bad Mothers: Medea-Myths and National Discourse in Texts from Elisabeth Langgässer and Christa Wolf

INGE STEPHAN

In times of upheaval, war, and crisis, whenever national identity is threatened and the core of individual self-conception is in question, the recourse to heroines and heroes of mythology in literature increases noticeably. Especially after the French Revolution, in times of political unrest and in the push toward modernization, one can observe such an increase in the number and extent of mythologically charged texts of Occidental "commemorative culture" (*Gedächtniskultur*) presiding over moments of crisis. At the core of the revival of mythological heroes and heroines, indeed, the true reference point of national identity formation is the relationship between genders. The reconstruction or deconstruction of heroic manliness or womanliness is not "work on myth" in Blumenberg's view, however, but rather an attempt to revitalize old gender images and familiar configurations in order to construct a new national identity. In this process, the figure of the mother, or rather the idea of motherliness as solicitousness and sacrifice unbound by time acquires a special meaning, with the "failure" of mothers in times of crisis and upheaval carrying more weight than the "blame" of fathers for the collapse of national order.

The figure of Medea, which challenges the concept of motherliness as no other literary character has, is an especially interesting and highly ambivalent reference for women writers, as will become clear in this essay's comparison of two texts from different eras. The first text, *Die Märkische Argonautenfahrt* (The Argonauts in the Mark of Brandenburg; 1950; hereafter *Argonautenfahrt*) by Elisabeth Langgässer, which appeared shortly after World War II, when female authors were beginning to explore the Medea figure, widely tabooed till then, in coming to terms with the war. The second, *Medea. Stimmen* (Medea: A modern retelling; 1996; hereafter *Medea*) by Christa Wolf is part of the "Medea Renaissance" of the 1980s and 1990s.[1] Despite their ideological and aesthetic differences, both texts are symptomatic of a phenomenon that recurs with amazing regularity in times of national and intellectual upheaval. The myth becomes a phantasmal sphere of reference [*Bezugsfeld*], in which subjective shock and the national condition connect in a way that makes it difficult to

distinguish one from the other. The two texts are also interesting with regard to how their authors coming from different times use the Medea figure to deal with questions of guilt, responsibility, order, repression, and oblivion in face of the collapse of the old systems.

Langgässer's novel *Die Märkische Argonautenfahrt*, which the author worked on from 1947 until her death in July 1950, and which was published posthumously that same year, is an intensely earnest epical attempt to "overcome" the "German catastrophe." In a letter written on January 1, 1947, Langgässer claims that work on her novel sustained her from hunger, cold, and worsening health: "Nevertheless, I have begun a new, big project; I have no idea of where and how far this narrative will go; a very remarkable, wholly mythical piece of prose, which, like Eurydike, emerges from a bottomless pit. Time, as strange as it sounds: 1945" (*Briefe*, 192). The novel, which, according to Langgässer, should have become a "cosmos of the postwar era," talks about the "German catastrophe" or the "German doom," and how it became rewritten euphemistically as in Apollonius Rhodius's *Argonautica*. In the summer of 1945, seven people go on a pilgrimage, modeled after the mythical voyage of the *Argo*, from bombed Berlin to the monastery of Anastasiendorf, which lies in the Mark of Brandenburg. All seven people—among them a Jewish married couple and a young resistance fighter—are obviously marked by the war and all are burdened by guilt, which though acquired differently, comes from the same origin: the desertion of God. Thus it is only logical that in their search for enlightenment, salvation, liberation, oblivion, remembrance, comfort, inspection, interpretation, the seven have a common goal: the monastery of Anastasiendorf, the Heavenly City, which is presented as the antithesis to the sinful Earthly City.[2] The Augustinian model forms the framework of the history of salvation [*Heilsgeschichte*] in which the pilgrimages of the seven people are imbedded. The pilgrimage leads the seven Argonauts through the countryside devastated by war, giving rise to an analogy between inner and outer destruction.

The pilgrim's search is a never-ending journey with a mythical purpose: "[T]hey would reach the Golden Fleece and at the sight of it, finally know that they would never have found it if it had not beckoned to them and shown them the way as a blinking light from heaven moving periodically over the horizon" (*Argonautenfahrt*, 276). As the shepherds and kings were led by the Star of Bethlehem to the manger of Jesus Christ, Langgässer's Argonauts were guided by a star, which showed them the path to Anastasiendorf, to that "Island of Order" where the harmonious order of Heavenly City could be expected: "The Island of Peace . . . the holy order, the goal of the Argo. The House of the Golden Fleece" (*Argonautenfahrt*, 268).

Sexuality is completely excluded from the Kingdom of Order. It is not coincidental that the representation of this "Order" are two female characters who are desexualized and not members of the Argonaut group: the Abbess Demetria,[3] whose name is a play on Demeter, and Sickle, the guardian angel of

the Argonauts whose name refers to Maria of the Moon Sickle (*Argonautenfahrt*, 165). "Little Sickle," an unattractive, hunchbacked woman, who accompanied the children transported to Auschwitz and who also saved the Jewish couple Lewi-Jeschower, is the good spirit in the novel. She is one of the many Madonna figures that prevail throughout the novel. These Madonna figures are pitched against the "wicked mothers," who live out their sexuality like animals and who kill their children. Medea appears as the mythical image of this "Wicked mother" in the novel, an "uncivilized, terrible being" who lives in deepness like the Gorgon Medusa; a horrible "Magna Mater" who devours what she has borne, "demanding victim after victim and is never satisfied" (*Argonautenfahrt*, 331). She is an insatiable, greedy woman who only can be saved by Maria. Medea's power continues, despite the tie to the history of salvation, despite the many Madonna figures that the text creates as antitheses. She lives not only in the "labyrinths and fox holes under the earth," but also has expanded her rule on earth (*Argonautenfahrt*, 311). She practically is everywhere: she has taken hold of the "souls" and the "language of people." She has found access to their "dreams" and "gestures" and even constitutes a part of their nourishment. She is the "nothing" that infiltrates where chaos reigns in place of order (*Argonautenfahrt*, 332).

> Like a tornado she swept over big cities and scattering the debris left over from the war; she raced over the open fields and did not even spare the truck gardens, and in those gardens on the railway embankment, the railroad cars, transformed into shelters, makeshift homes, refuges rose from the ground rattling, and began to spin rusty, gray-black laundry fluttering around, accompanied by horrid crows, which fell from the clouds. So moved Medea dwellings over streams and countries. (*Argonautenfahrt*, 333).

Only the Heavenly City, whose guardian patroness is the Virgin Mary, offers protection from this "nothingness"; only the "Imitation Maria" can provide the new "order," which is supposed to replace the old, collapsed one. The "new" kingdom fantasized in the novel is the Kingdom of the Spirit that is, a "manly" kingdom, in which Maria has officially been given the role of guardian patroness, the role of God's handmaiden, to which women in general have been reduced. "Reality," that is, the historical experience, has no place in such a polar, hierarchical system.

By contrast, Christa Wolf creates a totally different image of Medea in her novel, where she projects her experience of national rejection after 1989 into the mythical world of Colchis and Corinth. When asked, "how she came upon the character of Medea," Wolf answered:

> I, too, was surprised that the mythological material should grab hold of me once again, but then again it is not so surprising. I started dealing with the Medea figure in 1990-

> 1991. During those years it became clear to me that whenever there is a crisis, our culture repeatedly falls back on the same pattern of behavior: it excludes people, turns them into scapegoats, demonizes them to the point of an insanely false reality. This is a dangerous tendency, in my view. In West Germany, I had seen what happened to a country that excluded more and more groups, which increasingly lost its ability to integrate. Now, in a far larger Germany, we are experiencing how increasingly larger groups of people are becoming superfluous for social, ethnical and other reasons. It had begun with certain groups of the East German population, against who there developed a defensive position in the reunification process in the West. This exclusion of foreigners has run through the entire history of our culture. The exclusion of fear-inspiring feminine elements still exists. (Kammann, 28)

In contrast to Langgässer's Medea, fifty years before, Wolf's Medea is a positive identity figure. As Wolf explains in "Die andere Medea" (The other Medea; 1994; hereafter "Andere") a short essay written shortly before the publication of her novel, she is not interested in portraying Medea as the "wild, terrible woman" or as the " wicked, murderous mother" she appears to be in works by mostly male authors, from Euripides to Henry Miller. Rather, she wishes to portray the "other Medea," the "knowing one of good counsel, the healer" ("Andere," 17).

In Wolf's view, the "other Medea," unimaginable as a child murderess, is a "figure at the cutoff between different times." Having grown up in the predominantly "matriarchal" culture of Colchis, she follows Jason to Corinth and falls into patriarchal dependency there. In Corinth, however, she is unable to feel at home. As a "foreigner in alienated circumstances," she evokes the hatred of rulers and subordinates alike: "She is expelled, so the old legend says, not because she wants to fetter Jason with her magical powers; not because she kills her competitor and the king out of jealousy: clearly, she was banished because the people of Corinth could no longer tolerate her lack of restraint. Before she goes, she brings the sons to Hera's temple where she thinks they will be safe; the upright Corinthians go there and kill the children" ("Andere," 17). Even when Wolf admits to indulging in nothing more than mere speculation, she still adheres to her model of the "other Medea" because this conception allows a new insight into history and gender relationships: "In future interpretations, it should not be the question of why we have an insane child killer at the start of Occidental culture, but rather why civilized Corinthians must also murder the children of a 'wild one,' whom they have already driven out of the country, and why one of the greatest writers of this high-level culture has such a fear of portraying this fact that he has to falsify it to women's disadvantage" ("Andere," 18).

In her novel *Medea*, Wolf offers different answers to these questions. Reviewers have been less interested in these answers than in the fact that Wolf's Medea does not kill her children; for them, whether a Medea who does not kill is a contradiction in itself is more or less central. When George Tabori, paraphrasing Eurypides, had, not Medea, but Jason kill his children in the 1984 drama *M*, he was reproached for trivializing the Medea myth and delivering a "feminist melodrama." Regarding the first-night performance in Munich, one critic wrote: "A Medea without murder is a Sisyphus without a stone, a Siegfried without a dragon, or an Oedipus who allows his father to live and has no desire to marry his mother. Those who deprive Medea of murder, belittle her" (Radtke, 153). Christa Wolf has also been reproached for enfeebling and trivializing Medea. In *Der Spiegel*, Volker Hage writes (203): "This Medea does not hurt anyone. She has never hurt anyone. Neither the younger brother nor any of her children: No murder. Nowhere." This allusion to Wolf's novel, *Kein Ort. Nirgends* (No place on earth; 1979) is not only overdone, but it is also false, because there is more than enough murder in the novel: In Colchis, Aeetes commands his son to kill Apsyrtus so that he can remain in power and in Corinth, Creon lets his daughter Iphinoe be killed for the same reason. Medea, however, is involved in the deadly power game of the "father-kings": as sister, she feels partly guilty for the death of her brother in Colchis and as a "guest friend" in Corinth, she discovers that Creon's power rests on crime. Both of these "victims of the foundation process" result in further "kinds of death" in Corinth. Iphinoe's nurse loses her mind and jumps off a cliff; the mother Merope falls into an irretrievable depression and locks herself inside the palace; Iphinoe's sister Glauce also becomes mentally ill and commits suicide by jumping into a well. Medea is declared an undesirable foreigner and is driven from the streets and banned from the city as a "scapegoat" (*Medea*, 224). Arethusa, Medea's girlfriend, dies from the plague. Creon remains a broken man and Jason, robbed of his former and new wife and the coveted king's honor, fades towards approaching death in the shadow of the defeated *Argo* after his and Medea's sons Medus and Pheres are stoned to death by the Corinthians. Thus, at the end of the novel corpses surround Medea.

The rewriting of the myth is interpreted as a shifting of responsibility. It is not Medea, but power-hungry men and their accomplice Agameda who are accused of murder, and other kinds of "death." Yet, even though Wolf, in strongly focusing on the theme of "motherliness," exonerates Medea, as a mother, she is by no means finished with the theme of a "murderous mother" in her novel. It recurs in a remarkably displaced manner in the varying mother characters and images: there is Idiya, Medea's distant mother, to whom Medea appeals more than twenty times in the opening monologue; Merope, who cannot handle the death of her favorite daughter, Iphinoe, and who is cold and dismissive toward her daughter Glauce; the nursemaids, who remain nameless (like Medea, Iphinoe is raised by nursemaids); and Medea's friend, Lyssa, who takes on a nursemaid and mother role with Medea's sons (and whose own daughter Arinna comes to live with a group of women in the mountains at the

end of the novel, reminding one of the utopian commune of women in Wolf's 1983 novel *Kassandra*. Except for Lyssa and the nursemaids—the true mothers in the novel—all the other mothers in the book fail as mothers: they act coolly toward their children, leaving them in the hands of caretakers; indeed, doing nothing to prevent their children's murder or suicide.

Medea is also a problematic mother, not so much in her relationship with her sons (about which the text offers little information), but in her relationship with both of her "adopted" daughters, Glauce and Agameda. Glauce's suicide and Agameda's betrayal come in reaction to the loss of their biological mothers and the "failure" of their "surrogate mother." Because Medea's own mother, Idiya, was no role model, preventing neither the death of her son Apsyrtus nor the flight of her daughter Medea from Colchis to Corinth, Medea does not know how to be a mother to either Glauce or Agameda. Idiya's last words to her daughter ("Don't become like me") have a double meaning (*Medea*, 36). They both free Medea from the confines of a mother model and alienate her from the mother as an object of longing and desire, making it difficult for her to become a loving mother toward her children. In any case, Glauce, who once felt secure and cared for by Medea for a short time, now feels abandoned: Medea "made the same sudden changes with me as my mother did, with that she hummed the songs of my mother . . . There were days full of hope until she let me down, like my mother once let me down. She should have never done that. I hate her" (*Medea*, 152). Agameda, whom Medea took in as a young schoolgirl after the premature death of her mother, also received no emotional support from her adopted mother. Full of scorn, the grown-up Agameda reflects back to the withheld affection in her childhood: "Medea . . . taught me what she knew but she kept me from her, to my disappointment. She withheld the love a child aches for, and it was much later when I advanced to the front row of her class that she casually remarked to me that she knew I understood she had to treat me more strictly than the others so that no one could accuse her of favoring the daughter of her friend. It was then I began to hate her" (*Medea*, 89).

The daughters' disappointment shows that "motherliness" at the "cutoff between different periods" is fragmented and contradictory both as a genealogical and an emotional concept ("Andere," 17). This is even truer for the concept of fatherhood: the developing patriarchal alliances between men are founded on the corpses of murdered children; fathers sacrifice their own children to gain power. Mothers are not able to prevent the sacrifice; to some extent, they are even accomplices.

The varying concepts of friendship and alternative life and love models that Wolf creates (beside the numerous female friendships, there are also unrestrained relations between sexes in the house of the sculptor Oistros) go well beyond the matriarchal and patriarchal models impossible in the "slaughterhouse" Corinth (*Medea*, 160). Wolf seems to tie these images, albeit weakly and vaguely, to her *Kassandra* project, where, besides exploring the potential for violence in relationships, she suggests that amid murder and death, there is hope for life as well.

Like Cassandra, Medea is also an important figure in this utopian writing project, which refers back to myth as forgotten and the repressed history of our self. Both Cassandra and Medea are strong, undomesticated women who remember the lost dreams in sexual relationships as a "thorn in the flesh of the tamed" ("Andere," 17).

The exhibit "Myths of Nations" (Berlin, 1998) showed clearly how often national discourses make use of mythical images to express traditional gender conceptions; already in 1996, there was a section entitled "Myths as Argument" at the Historian's Congress in Munich. Increasingly, however, it is argued that we suffer from a "myth deficit" today, indeed, that we have never had "legitimate myths" inalienable to the survival of the individual and society. In his book, *Das Kraftfeld der Mythen* (The force field of myths; 1997), Norbert Bischof claims that myths reflect, not the political struggles of a nation dealing with historical realities, but rather the spiritual struggles of individuals dealing with childhood and puberty. Myths provide individuals an indispensable means for orienting and positioning themselves in the world. Despite his individual, historical perspective, a historical-national perspective can be detected throughout the book: "The affective force of field, in which myth once established order, has been taken over this century by an extreme ideology in our country; as a result, destructive energies were unleashed in unprecedented historical and global proportions. It is our duty to work on the clarification of the psychological background of this catastrophe" (Bischof, 18).

In looking at myth as an organizing and defining power, Bischof takes much the same approach to C. G. Jung that Johann R. Gascard does in his 1993 book, *Medea-Morphosen: Eine mytho-psychohistorische Untersuchung zur Rolle des Mannweiblichen im Kulturprozeß* (Medea- morphoses. A mythopsychohistorical study of the role of the manwoman in the process of culture). In contrast to Bischof's worldly and humanistic arguments, however, Gascard's are rigidly narrow. Seeing the respective condition of relationships between the sexes reflected in myth, particularly in the Medea myth, Gascard (13) interprets the present-day "Medea-Renaissance"—especially in the increase of texts by women authors—as the "indignation of the contemporary woman" toward her "biological designation:" "Increasingly and more aggressively, today's woman is rejecting the role dictated to her by patriarchal society for centuries [that] of subordinate, biological reproducer as well as practical and emotional caretaker of the male half of the population." It is the "increasing lack of physical and spiritual love and motherliness of the emancipated woman" that has brought about the present desolate condition of the world (Gascard, 374):

> By "raising" her bent-over back as the "bearer of culture" and refusing to fulfill uncomplainingly the exclusive role of "vaginal uteral" lover and wife, the Medea-woman lets the shared burden of patriarchal culture slide off her shoulders, ripping apart the prevailing cultural and biological tradition and dissolving in the regressive mystical spirituality of the

> "childlike" [alterskindischen] and merely fictitious "New Age," or in an anarchy of the already looming new migration of peoples. (Gascard, 374).

The sexist and racist undertones, so reminiscent of C. G. Jung's regrettable susceptibility to fascist thought, mark the androgynous final vision of the cultural rebirth of humanity as a "hermaphroditic, complete 'Integration'":

> However, the current dismemberment and dissolution of our western, occidental culture appears altogether as only the first act of the Medean "barbaric" cultural upheaval in a boiling kettle of renewed dark, chaotic, creative times of change, at whose end, however, there stands a "heightened" cultural rebirth of a—so to speak–rejuvenated lamb. Certainly, its essence hardly consists in a further strengthening of the one-sided, male element, but rather more in a hermaphroditic, complete "integration" that would give the "dream of Medea," till now dreamt of in vain, a real chance to come true. (Gascard, 375)

However extreme its positions may seem, Gascard's book typifies (after all, it has to do with a publication that qualifies him as a university lecturer) where the crossing of various strands of discourse can lead. Myth, gender, nation, and the "wicked mothers" form the parts of a fatal chain of argumentation, in which the national system is built on images of gender, raised to the rank of archetypes. In their varying Medea-references, theoretical and literary texts alike suffer when they invoke the "truth" of myth, a "truth" that is problematic in at least two major respects. First, there is no myth per se, only different versions of myths—notwithstanding a relatively firm core of fable—which are constantly created and then re-created through narration. Second, mythological narratives and retellings open a realm of association, which, to a large extent, is unrelated to the author's intent. Although authors profit from the aura of the myth, their texts are bound to an intertextual nexus of meaning, becoming subtexts within the new texts, whether the authors wish it or not. Thus the appeal to myth as "truth," far from "solving" any problems, pushes them to new levels: from a national to familiar level, from a familiar level to mythological level, and vice versa.

Indeed, the "truth of myth" is revealed only to those who embark on the adventuresome and strenuous "work on myth" and see it as a never conclusive, potentially never-ending exercise in interpretation, one that will never rise to the rank of final, incontrovertible truth. The search for the "other Medea" as a possible reflection of our self appears to me to be far more worthwhile than the constantly renewed invocation of the horror image of Medea as the "wicked mother."

(Translated by Jillian Haeseler)

Notes

[1] All translations are provided by Jillian Haeseler.
[2] Compare with Fliedl, 1986. See also Augsberger 1962, especially 98-100.
[3] In general Demetria represents a divided Eve, rather than a pure Virgin Mary figure. The reference to her beauty, on the one hand, and her association with Medusa, on the other, points to her end: "Sie wurde als reines, kostbares Gold in dem Tiegel des Großen Engels zerrieben, der die Seufzer und Bitten, die Reue, die Einsicht vor den Thron des Allwissenden trägt" (*Argonautenfahrt*, 409).

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