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Amy Wygant, *Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France: Stages and Histories, 1553-1797*. Aldershot and Burlington, Ver.: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007. X + 217 pp. Footnotes, figures, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-5924-2

Review by Rebecca M. Wilkin, Pacific Lutheran University

Through the analysis of ancien régime incarnations of Medea, Amy Wygant traces the transformation of glamour—originally, the witch’s spell or illusion, related in French to *grimoire*, the witch’s book of spells—to its modern association with a certain feminine aura and more broadly, cultural seduction. The transformation of the meaning of glamour from doing evil to exuding elegance took place, Wygant argues, because the early modern French public—an entity that she is careful to qualify as always already constructed—identified with Medea, despite her status as barbarian, witch, and murderous mother (p. 99). Unlike other heroines—Lucretia, whose suicide galvanized the founding of the Roman republic, or Helen, absent object of desire—Medea survives while all those around her perish, largely as a result of her magic. One strand of Wygant’s analysis, textually based, seeks to reveal the enduring association of Medea with modernity. Another strand, which follows the psychoanalytic approaches of Lynn Hunt and Lyndal Roper, endeavors to explain the dynamics behind her audiences’ improbable affection for her.

Wygant establishes Medea’s modernity for different publics through analyses that cluster around three dramatizations of her story: de la Péruse’s *La Médée* (1553), Pierre Corneille’s first tragedy, *Médée* (1635), and Cherubini’s *Médée: Opéra en trois actes* (1797). All of Wygant’s analyses include images: engravings from editions of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and Alciati’s *Emblems* as well as paintings by Caravaggio and Dalí. Strikingly, most sixteenth-century images of Medea illustrated her rejuvenation of Aeson (rather than the murder of her children), for in this segment of her story, Medea “conveniently embodied the notion of renaissance and was a point upon which to focus all of the anxieties about rebirth, revival, repetition, innovation, and identity connected with this project” (p. 50). La Péruse’s 1553 play reflects this same ambivalence regarding the classical legacy; the chorus targets the deceptive words of the Greeks (Creon and Jason), leading the audience to sympathize with Medea, an outsider, as in Euripides’ (Greek) version. By 1635, the chorus had disappeared from the tragic stage, and Corneille’s Medea (a precursor to Chimène) flouted propriety for the greater pleasure of the public. Wygant describes the audience’s willingness to overlook *invraisemblance* as assent to her magic. Just as witchcraft is a crime entailing what people in a given community find believable, so the verisimilitude of tragedy amounts, at least in Corneille’s novel conception, to what the audience is willing to be persuaded by. The pages in which Wygant examines the interpolation of Pollux, Corneille’s connection to La Péruse through Colletet, and Jason’s sadistic desire to torture Medea (pp. 83-102), are the best in the book and should not be missed by any student of Corneille.

Medea’s witchiness (as emphasized by Seneca, La Péruse, and Corneille) ceded in the eighteenth century to overwhelming interest in her motherhood. Audiences of Cherubini’s opera directed their pity not to the betrayed magician, but to the fragile motherhood of the singer-actress who played her, Julie-Angelique Scio; thenceforth, a woman, not a witch, embodied glamour. But Enlightenment thinkers also renewed the trope of Medea as a figure of modernity. Diderot compares the reinvigoration of the

nation to Aeson chopped up and boiled by Medea, an avatar of the revolutionary man of genius. Diderot's violent notion of revolution (based on an erroneous and economical account of Medea's criminal activity, for he conflates Aeson, whom she rejuvenated, with Pelias, whom she persuaded others to kill) features a protagonist endowed with occult powers and a counter-natural killing of the previous generation distinct from the stoic trope of the cycle of civilizations. Eliding Medea's infanticide with barren paternity, Diderot insists that "the man of genius [who initiates national regeneration] leaves no posterity" (p. 188).

Wygant's analyses reveal audiences' affection towards Medea, and the contingency of the modernity that they project on her. Wygant theorizes this response to Medea as her "glamour"; specifically, Medea's acutely singular subjectivity (emphasized especially by Seneca and Corneille) is transferred to her audience via the dynamic of group narcissism. When, within a group, individual narcissism is threatened, "a group ego ideal is put into place to compensate [for it]" (p. 110). Such groups choose leaders who are promoters of illusion, "behind which there is always assumed a narcissistic fantasy of reunion with the mother" (p. 111). Medea satisfied audiences "thirsting... for illusion and for a magician to mediate between the body of the group and the body of the mother" (p. 111). This is truly a fascinating suggestion whose fruits Wygant could have reaped more fully through a return to the text. Instead, she opts to anchor Medea's appeal in (Corneille's) time by linking the illusions of group narcissism to contemporary theories of dramatic and demoniacal illusions, namely through the work of d'Aubignac and La Mesnardière, authors of treatises of poetics who took (opposite) stands in the possession of Loudun. Wygant concludes her investigation of early modern theories of illusion by turning to representations of Narcissus. In failing to recognize illusion (his reflection) for what it is, Narcissus represents the "audience" viewing the image. The relation of the audience that views images of Narcissus to the theater audience that loved Medea is not entirely obvious. Indeed, though the pages on Narcissus as an emblem of self-love and novelty are enlightening, this reader suspects that Medea would not have been pleased to see him play such a large supporting role in her story: "Moi. Moi, dis-je et c'est assez" (Corneille, *Médée* I, 5).

Wygant's writing is lively and clever. She converses with a dizzying variety of critics and generously references the contributions of colleagues in the field. She brings a rich array of discourses into contact with one another, including medicine, alchemy, catoptromancy, demonology, and art history, as well as literary criticism and psychoanalysis. At times, enigmatic verve could have been usefully tempered by patient explanation, and this reader would have preferred, within chapters, that more space be allotted to the principle thesis, with less room given to competing or alternative interpretations. Ultimately, the judgment the reader makes of *Medea, Magic, and Modernity* will reflect the expectations he or she has for cultural history. The reader who embraces "productive exercise[s] in speculation" (p. 105)—who is, like Corneille's audience, amenable to glamorous persuasion—will admire Wygant's original insights, her mastery of an interdisciplinary body of evidence, and her admittedly experimental methodology. The reader who asks the cultural historian to develop an exclusive line of argument and to supply hard proofs for it, like the tell-tale insensitive spot on the witch's body, may on the other hand rue *Medea, Magic, and Modernity's* "illusions". Regardless of readerly taste, Wygant's book is of prime importance for scholars and students of early modern French theater, witchcraft theory, and mythological adaptations, while her methodology will stimulate those engaged in psychoanalytical approaches to early modern literature and culture.

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