

medea's
daughters

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Forming and Performing
the Woman Who Kills

JENNIFER JONES



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For Charlotte Weaver Jones

1915–2001

“Mere”

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introduction

female offenders and offensive females

The fear of the disobedient woman is the fear of the unwed mother; is the fear of the spurned wife turned to rebel; is the fear of the witch; is the fear of Medea.¹

IN THE RICH DRAMATIC literature left to us by the ancient Greeks there are hundreds, if not thousands, of corpses. Many of the unfortunate met their death at the hands of a member of their own family; indeed, if one could pile up all the bodies of those murdered by their relatives in Greek tragedy, the mound would fill most contemporary stages. Adding more than her share of bodies is Medea, one of the most prolific murderers in Greek tragedy.

Euripides' Medea has walked our stages for over two thousand years, and she has, through repeated performance, become an icon for feminine criminality. Elaine Aston writes that "in terms of those 'classic' periods of theatre, where women have been absent from the stage, it has been possible to understand how the female has been constructed as a man-made sign in her absence."² And just as the "idealized woman" has been constructed onstage, so has her antithesis, the monstrous female, the Medea. When Medea first spoke upon the stage, a male actor in woman's mask and dress spoke the words of a male author. Like Clytemnestra before her, Medea's "man-made" monstrousness deflects the patriarchal acknowledgment of women's legitimate anger at being designated "less than" men. In this context Medea represents the perfect synthesis of criminal and feminist. She is the havoc women will wreak when they are no longer content to be submissive.

The woman who kills, in particular the woman who kills a member of her own family, has not only broken the law but has also violated gender expectations. Idealized "woman" has traditionally been constructed as self-

sacrificing, passive, and nurturing; therefore, when actual women become violent, some sense must be made of their actions if the myth of feminine passivity is to be maintained. *Medea's Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who Kills* argues that for over four hundred years, dramatic representations (plays and ballads, and more recently, television programs) have been used to contain and control cultural anxiety evoked by the disturbing figure of the female killer.

In her pioneering work *Women Who Kill* Ann Jones provides a recuperative history of the American murderess, and that book certainly sets the stage for my analysis. *Women Who Kill* provides a chronological exploration of famous (and not so famous) murder trials featuring female defendants and provides a feminist analysis of the ways in which those trials reflected and reinforced the subordination of women. *Medea's Daughters* builds on this important work by integrating a feminist analysis of the dramatic representations that circulated alongside, and often long after, the original trial.

Medea's Daughters draws on performance analysis and on theories of representation to enrich the judicial history provided in *Women Who Kill*. An intertextual analysis of the ways in which women who kill have been represented in the courts, in the press, and in the theater, *Medea's Daughters* explores the ways those representations have been used to reinforce women's subordinate status. This book emphasizes performance analysis, but analysis that includes the trial itself as a performance on par with the dramatic representations that followed it. This approach has the advantage of persistently invoking the material body embedded in legal and criminological discourse.

Theater historian Charlotte Canning has recently explored the ways in which the writing of history is as performative as the performances it attempts to historicize.³ My analysis of the theatrical representations of real-life murderesses reveals how the performances themselves seeped beyond the purview of traditional theater history and became part of a larger cultural history of gender relations. As cultural theorist Annette Kuhn argues, "If representations always have use value, then more often than not they also have exchange value: they circulate as commodities in a social/economic system."⁴ Each of the performances analyzed here has circulated along with multiple gendered messages from religious, legal, and scientific discourses that together have had a significant impact on women's lived experience.

Certainly there has been a lively debate in feminist cultural studies over the power of the image to reify ideology. Toril Moi questions the usefulness of "images of women" criticism to the feminist political project. "To study 'images of women' in fiction is equivalent to studying false images of

women. The ‘image’ of women in literature is invariably defined in opposition to the ‘real person’ whom literature never quite manages to convey to the reader.”⁵ But as Stuart Hall shows in “Racist Images in the Media” and as Annette Kuhn articulates in “Power of the Image,” there is a value in understanding how these stereotypical images impact power relations in a culture. “How we ‘see’ ourselves and our social relations *matters*, because it enters into and informs our actions and practices.”⁶ The act of looking at these murder cases in a feminist historiography performs a subversive gesture and provides a resistant reading to the encoded messages of the courtroom and stage. The analysis here is offered as an act of political intervention aimed at exposing the construction of gender ideology, which marks independent women as criminals and criminal women as monstrous. This history of murdering women, as Canning would say, “Resists and reveals norms by pointing to the production of those norms.”⁷

Medea provides the starting point for this book and serves as my Ur-murderess. The ancient stories of her crimes laid the foundations for our current response to women who kill, and her name still evokes images of unchecked female rage. The accepted explanation of Medea’s crime, a spurned and jealous woman taking revenge on an unfaithful husband, has endured for centuries, and it bears some examination.

Medea Past

Medea revenges herself on Jason in the only way open to her; he has little regard for her love for him, but the children are his property, an extension of himself, of his identity . . . Medea has contrived a punishment for him *that no Greek woman would have dared*: in leaving him childless, Medea transforms Jason into an exile like herself, prophesying that he will die “without distinction.”⁸ (Emphasis mine)

In *Masters of the Drama* John Gassner describes Euripides’ *Medea* as “A remarkable study of the conflict of the sexes, a penetrative analysis of the relative interests of man and woman, a powerful tragedy of frenzied jealousy, *Medea* is a landmark of realistic drama.”⁹ A feminist may be tempted to ask, what is so real about this man-made woman? As Gassner says, Jason’s desertion leads Medea to a “frenzied jealousy” and to a desire to wound Jason as he has wounded her. As W. B. Worthen describes the murders he frames them as an “eye for an eye,” a desire to even the score. Just as Jason’s withdrawal left Medea an exile without distinction, so the murder of his sons will reduce him to a life “without distinction.” This interpretation encases Medea in the role of wife and assumes that her life is destroyed when she is

no longer Jason's possession. In this reading Medea's only option is to bring him down with her.

Medea does what "no Greek woman would do"; she is, literally, the foreigner, the barbarian, the Other. Her situation is juxtaposed with that of the women's chorus. These women sympathize with her abandonment but they tell her that, as difficult as it is, it is a cross she must bear with dignity. At the base of this choral (read communal) response is the assumption that it is *natural* for wives to suffer, and it is *natural* for men to discard the old for the new. What is *unnatural* is for a woman to strike back.

Medea's desire to punish those who would deprive her of her role as wife is seen as vindictive and unwomanly. Only an unnatural woman would rise against a system that is so much stronger than she. Her role as outsider and sorceress is central to the framing of her rebellion. Medea needs the aid of magic and sorcery to poison the "pure" womanhood of Creon's daughter. Medea's assertion of self is "foreign," "alchemical," and outside the boundaries of accepted female behavior. Medea's abnormality tacitly asserts the normality of women who *will* sacrifice their self for the good of their father/husband/son. A central theme in *Medea's Daughters* is that the criminal woman is defeminized in legal, journalistic, and dramatic discourse; they are separated from "normal" women, thereby reassuring the patriarchy that women embrace their submissive status. In *Acting Women* Lesley Ferris writes, "The plight of the wayward Medea, then, parallels the plight of self-willed Clytemnestra: both are denied the natural rights of motherhood by patriarchal justice, Clytemnestra's denial occurs in a civilized, apparently democratic trial. Medea, through her own violent actions, destroys her right, and eternally remains to prove the patriarchy right."¹⁰ The only "right" Medea has is to motherhood, not selfhood. With descriptors like "wayward" and "self-willed," Ferris frames Medea's crime as impotent female rage—a violent rebellion that, when isolated in her "foreign" body, justifies the dominant culture's insistence that *their* women, the natural and true women, be submissive. Medea, like Clytemnestra before her, is the denaturalized woman who diverts the patriarchal acknowledgment of women's legitimate anger at being designated as "less than" men, by framing all feminine anger as both foreign and deadly. She is the dramatic mother of the women in this book.

Narratives of Containment

Cultural historians have long noted that the retelling or reenacting of crime stories reinforces existing power relations and maintains the status quo. When an audience hears or sees a criminal—who by definition has

transgressed social norms—put on trial and convicted, those social norms are reinscribed. Legal historian Janice Schuetz writes that “popular trials reflect the values of the context in which they take place. In a sense they are complex texts illuminating the ways people reason in a defined time, place and community.”¹¹ When the defendant is a woman, these trials also expose cultural anxieties over the place of women in society.

In *The Mythology of Crime and Criminal Justice* Victor Kappeler notes that when traditional beliefs are under attack, representations of crime in popular culture proliferate. “The subjects of [crime] myths are characterized as constituting a major threat to middle-class values, norms, or lifestyles. Myths of crime and justice when blended with threats to religious beliefs, economic systems, sexual attitudes or orientation, the traditional family, or political preference become a volatile mix.”¹² Kappeler goes on to say, “The argument is simple; a growing menace is plaguing society. Not only is the conduct the preference of a deviant group, it is affecting innocents and endangering tradition.”¹³ In times of feminist resistance the murderess appears in plays and films, on the front pages of newspapers, and on the evening broadcasts in numbers totally disproportionate to her actual existence. The cases of the women studied in this book focus on disruptive and dangerous women who threaten the institutions of marriage, motherhood, and filial duty. Their cases received far more press than comparable murder trials in which men killed their wives, mistresses, or daughters.

Many have read the massive public attention paid to the trials and sentencing of these women as indicating a concern for a rise in female crime in the given cultural moment, but I believe that the popularity of dramatic representations of criminal women has little relation to any actual increase in female criminality. This book argues that dramatic representations of criminal women proliferate in times of feminist activity because they contain anxiety about gender roles and, in so doing, deflect attention away from the systematic repression of women.

Our intense preoccupation with certain kinds of crime and our studied ignorance of others clarifies our moral boundaries and, more importantly, articulates the power structures inherent in the drawing of those boundaries. For example, images of the powerless violently usurping privilege proliferate in our popular culture: in best-selling novels young black men who live in dangerous neighborhoods rob and assault affluent whites (*Bonfire of the Vanities*); on movie screens lesbians seduce men and murder them with ice picks (*Basic Instinct*); on the television battered wives kill their sleeping husbands (*The Burning Bed*). Kappeler argues that images like these serve to generate “moral panics,”¹⁴ and they remind a nervous populace daily that a criminal element is threatening all that is good and natural in our society

(e.g., white privilege, heterosexuality, and the sanctity of marriage). That 90 percent of homicides are intraracial, with black and Latin American populations constituting a disproportionate share of both victims and offenders, or that gays and lesbians are routinely the victims rather than the perpetrators of violent attacks, or that women are three times more likely to be killed by their husbands than to kill them, is not reflected in the popular representations of crime.¹⁵ In the midst of the moral panics generated by a proliferation of crime narratives, the rich robbing the poor and the strong suppressing the weak goes unnoticed and uncriminalized.

Medea's Daughters focuses on the legal, cultural, and dramatic representations of six women accused of murdering an intimate. Each of their trials became national obsessions and focused attention on the role of women in society. Their stories span five centuries: Alice Arden (1550s), Mary Edmondson (1780s), Lizzie Borden (1890s), Ruth Snyder (1920s), Francine Hughes (1970s), and Louise Woodward (1990s). The dramatic representations of these women's trials are read in the context of other historical representations of female criminality, such as legal records, press coverage, ballads, and biography. This intertextual reading across disciplines and representations reveals the play script or screenplay and its production as an historical document; the dramatic representation of the criminal woman then emerges as one commentary among several on a particular trial and on the legal position encoded in that trial's verdict.

As we travel through the centuries, from *Medea* to Alice Arden to the more recent trial of Louise Woodward, the primary means of communicating the morality tales of women's crime changes. For narrative containment to be effective it must reach a broad section of the population. In sixteenth-century England, where this study begins, the primary means of cultural communication in the largely illiterate population was through ballads sung in the streets and plays performed in the public theaters. In the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, before the advent of film and television, the public regularly attended the theater in both small towns and large cities. Now, the television has replaced the ballad and the theater as the primary means of communication.

Methodology

Each chapter begins with an overview of the legal and social position of women at the time the murder was committed, providing specific data on female crime rates as well as contemporaneous theories of female criminology. Then, each chapter focuses in depth on a particular case in which a woman was accused of murdering a member of her own family or, in one

case, a child in her care. By analyzing the legal and journalistic discourse, comparing trial records and the public interpretations of those proceedings, I expose the ideologies of gender at work in the woman's trial. Finally, each chapter analyzes a play, movie, or television program that provides a dramatic representation of that woman's crime, trial, and punishment. By examining the ways in which the woman's story is formed into a morality play that warns other women of the dangers of self-determination, I place the dramatic representation into a broader circulation of gender instruction within the culture. Examining the ways in which women's legal status has evolved over five centuries reveals how representations of criminal women have reinforced traditional gender roles far more often than they have challenged them.

Traditionally, the legal subject has been a male subject, and as Catherine MacKinnon writes in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, "The law sees and treats women the way that men see and treat women. The state authoritatively constitutes the social order in the interest of men as a gender."¹⁶ In criminal law and its administration, the organization of gender is particularly visible. The law is written from the standard of the "reasonable man." This abstract rights-bearing person is embodied in male form.¹⁷ Economic status, political affiliation, religious orientation, psychological history, and of course gender, quickly problematize the concept of one quantifiable reasonable standard of action and thought.

In any legal action, the accused is said to be represented by counsel; in a sense it is the *representation* of the defendant that the jury finds guilty or innocent. The representation does not negate the materiality of the defendant or the victim(s), but because the jury did not see the crime, it must be re-presented. The belief that the representation of the defendant as presented by counsel is the unmediated narration of "true" character is intensified if, like most of the women in this book, the defendant does not testify on her own behalf.

Until very recently women's experiences and perspectives were not incorporated in legal practice. Their stories have been told by men to men, and they have been judged according to the standards set by other "reasonable men." As a feminist historian I attempt to uncover the cultural construction of gendered identities and reveal how, historically, they have affected the outcomes of trials in which women are the accused. How and by whom was the woman described in court, in print, and on stage? What level of feminist resistance was present in her culture at the time of her trial or at the time of the representation of her crime in dramatic form? What standard of femininity was the woman being held against? How did her race, physical appearance, sexuality, marital status, economic position, or

political beliefs affect her conviction or acquittal? How did they affect her historical and dramatic representation?

In “History as Usual?: Feminism and the ‘New Historicism’” Judith Newton argues that it has always been a feminist project to focus on the cultural force of representation. Given the absence of women in official documentation, a “cross cultural montage,” or interdisciplinary reading of multiple texts against each other, is the primary *modus operandi* for the recovery of women’s history. But she argues that the texts that are read against each other are often productions of the same dominant culture that feminist historians have been attempting to read past.¹⁸ As I focus on the representation of female criminality, I run headlong into Newton’s concern. I have no trouble reading intertextually, for criminology is a highly documented field, but the documents I am drawn to—the legal, medical, criminological, journalistic, and dramatic—are almost exclusively authored by men. However, more problematic than the question of authorship are the gendered assumptions built into the legal and scientific community themselves. These assumptions, in addition to the strict conventions of the pre-twentieth-century stage, converge to obscure the self-representation of the female who is perceived by her culture as criminal. Tied as I am to the historically specific, gendered assumptions and values embedded in my source material, I have searched for feminine texts to read against the dominant narratives. Rarely do criminal or criminalized women leave a record of their own experiences or perspectives. Most either did not choose, or were not allowed, to testify at their own trials. However, the tension in absence is a motivation for a feminist, and I have attempted to animate my subjects’ silence by looking at women’s texts outside the theater and the law. Particularly useful in understanding the construction of gendered identities and their effects on women defendants are writings on marriage and childrearing, and texts of feminist resistance, such as suffrage and protest literature.

Each of the women in this study was the center of national attention in a sensational murder trial. Each became the subject of popular entertainment—in a ballad or a play or a television program—that kept her in the public psyche long after the jury delivered a verdict. Alice Arden’s crime was still being played in public squares three hundred years after her body had burned to ashes. The longevity of these women’s stories in a world where thousands kill and are killed in relative anonymity demands explanation.

Chapter 1, “Petty (T)reasons for Killing Her Lord and Master,” focuses on the case of Alice Arden. Convicted and executed in the sixteenth century for the conflated crime of adultery and murder, Alice Arden begins this book because her story is the earliest extant dramatic narrative of domestic murder based on a documented historical event. The dramatic representations of

Alice Arden and the critical response to them reveal cultural anxieties about women in pursuit of economic independence, sexual self-determination, and self-governance in early modern England. Contained in the structured narratives of two plays and several ballads, the cultural reenactment of Alice's crime and its punishment attempts to justify the economic, social, and cultural restraints that for centuries subsumed a married woman in the legal persona of her husband.

Chapter 2, "Absence of (M)alice on the Victorian Stage," focuses on the nineteenth-century dramatic representation of Mary Edmondson. Hanged for the murder of her aunt in the eighteenth century, she was "rehabilitated" on the Victorian stage into an innocent woman, cut down from the gallows in the nick of time. The murderess presented the Victorians with a particularly vexing dilemma, for she had not only broken the law but she had, more problematically, violated the cultural code of womanhood. This chapter examines the defeminization of criminal women in medical, sociological, and criminological texts and the absence of the masculinized, criminal woman on the Victorian stage. By comparing the eighteenth-century trial of the real Mary Edmondson to the nineteenth-century dramatic retelling of her story, this chapter analyzes the role of the stage in the creation and perpetuation of the "angel in the house."

Chapter 3, "A Jury of Her Peers," focuses on the case of Ruth Snyder, a woman convicted of murdering her husband in 1927, and the representation of her story in Sophie Treadwell's expressionistic play *Machinal*. Depicted by the prosecutor and the press as a woman who posed a serious threat to the American way of life, Ruth Snyder was used as an example to those women who might take their new "freedom" too literally. In contrast to the press and prosecutors who represented Snyder as a deviant woman, an aberration far removed from the feminine ideal, Treadwell rejected the notion that femininity and criminal behavior are mutually exclusive and implied that any woman could find herself in Snyder's position. In *Machinal* Treadwell posits that a woman's natural state is not matrimony and motherhood but that those roles are forced upon her by a patriarchal culture that relies on female submission and self-sacrifice.

Chapter 4, "Totaled Women," examines the case of Francine Hughes, whose 1978 acquittal in the case of her husband's murder prompted one journalist to note that it was "open season on husbands." *The Burning Bed*, a television movie based on Hughes's case, aired as part of National Domestic Violence Week and was the first major movie about domestic violence to be broadcast on national television. Actress Farrah Fawcett, famous for her television role on *Charlie's Angels*, was cast as Francine Hughes; the television movie, viewed by over seventy-five million people, indelibly wedded

the two women in the American psyche. The Francine Hughes created by Farrah Fawcett became for many the prototype of the battered wife, ironically reinforcing traditional notions of feminine passivity and self-sacrifice.

Chapter 5, “Medea Returns,” examines the trial of British au pair Louise Woodward for the murder of eight-month-old Matthew Eappen, one of the two children in her care. It was a case closely followed by the media, broadcast “gavel to gavel” on *Court TV*, and later used as the inspiration for an episode of the popular legal television series *Law & Order*. The case was rife with ambiguity, from the coverage of the crime to the judge’s eventual negation of the jury’s verdict. Many of the themes that emerge in previous chapters are evident in the Woodward case—the equation of womanhood with motherhood, the idealization of feminine self-sacrifice, and the perceived danger to cultural stability represented by the mother who works outside of her home. Though these centuries-old conceptions of gender emerge in the Woodward case, they seem to have lost some of their traction; the unanimous chorus of hatred that greeted Ruth Snyder has devolved into a complex fugue of point and counterpoint. The case and its subsequent representations both embrace and resist the cultural desire to disassociate the idealized woman from the criminal and to criminalize the woman who steps outside traditional gender norms.

Chapter 6, “Narratives of Resistance,” explores two contemporary plays that challenge the traditional narratives of containment usually applied to women who kill. Sharon Pollock’s play *Blood Relations* offers a critique of patriarchal representation in the case of Lizzie Borden. Franca Rame and Dario Fo’s *Medea* takes this icon of unnatural womanhood into the next millennium with a surprising justification for the murders. Both offer resistant feminist narratives that call the whole concept of “natural” womanhood into question.

Finally, a brief afterword looks at the recent case of Andrea Yates, a woman convicted of drowning her five children in order to save them from “being tormented by Satan.”¹⁹ As of this writing her story has yet to be dramatized, though one could certainly read the trial as drama. The Yates trial raises some provocative questions about the potential power of existing dramatic representations, in this case an episode of the television series *Law & Order*, to influence jurors and affect the outcome of a trial.

Dramatic representations of women who kill have played an important role in perpetuating notions of a “woman’s place” and of what constitutes the very idea of woman herself. *Medea’s Daughters* suggests that dramatic representations of accused women both drew upon and influenced legal and journalistic representations of criminal women. By examining these “popular entertainments” this book explores the intersection between the

discourse of criminality, used to comment on women accused of legal transgressions, and the discourse of abnormality, used to criminalize women who transgressed traditional norms of femininity. By offering a resistant reading of these collective performances, my analysis aims to read “against the grain” and to offer the reader “the pleasure of resistance, of saying ‘no’: not to ‘unsophisticated’ enjoyment by ourselves and others, of culturally dominant images, but to the structures of power which ask us to consume them uncritically and in highly circumscribed ways.”²⁰

So let us begin with Alice. . . .