

## The Body as Agency of Imaginary Gendering: Re-imagining Medea's Gender Formation and Positioning

Johan Othman <sup>1+</sup>, Izmer Ahmad <sup>2</sup> and Shakila Abdul Manan <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup> School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia

<sup>3</sup> School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia

**Abstract.** Medea's gendering has been considered as ambiguous due to many factors contributing towards her transgression of gender norms. Based on this point, the aim of this study is to address issues of Medea's gendering within context of recent gender discourse and provide a possible solution to re-evaluate her gender formation and positioning in both texts and images that have represented her figure. Method of this study draws upon the theory of gender performativity as a tool of interpretation and approach to reading and gauging Medea's gendering. As a result, this study offers a potential to asserting further the possibility to derive, read and recognizing gender, in both texts and visual images, as a tangible possibility and manifestation but at the same time an instance of an impossible internalisation.

**Keywords:** Medea, gender performativity.

### 1. Introduction

This paper will address issues of Medea's gendering in her image representations in order to illustrate the artificiality of gender as a body construct. The human body has been subjected to being an agency of many non-natural constructs such as culture, race, religion and gender to name a few. These artificial formations and institution of the body are based on abstract concepts that can be deemed as an external invention imposed onto as well as into the body and to the extent that these abstractions can be considered as imaginary. Given such status of the gendered body, the ambiguity of Medea's gender identity could attest further to the idea that gender is not fixed to the body and is itself questionable.

### 2. Medea and the Vicissitudes of Gender

Medea is a female figure from ancient Greek mythology whose existence is known in texts as far back as c.730 BC in Eumelos' poem "Korinthiaka" (Griffiths 2006, 16). Her story has since appeared in many variations. The most common narrative of her legend involves her revenge towards her husband's infidelity and betrayal resulting in the murder of her own children. To date, there are plenty of images of Medea that are being represented in many kinds of visual forms ranging from high art to the popular. Amongst them are paintings, film and theatre posters, compact discs booklet cover, sculptures, and images in the internet. Today these representations are mostly very different, in terms of styles and concepts, from the images of Medea that were initially depicted in early Greek vases and sculptural reliefs due to liberties taken by artists attempting varying interpretations of the figure. Similarly, in the theatre, there have been various re-adaptations of the image of Medea since its initial presentation in Classical Greece until the more recent contemporary theatrical performance of the tragedy which Marianne McDonald has asserted that "the twentieth century is especially rich in reworking of this myth" (Mc Donald 1997).

Due to an unrestrictive permeation of the Medea myth the figure of Medea have been presented in varying ways by numerous authors and artists. This malleability of myths has its problems and according to

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<sup>+</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: + 6017 558 3820; fax: + 604 653 0461  
E-mail address: johan\_othman@yahoo.com.

Griffiths, “the fluid nature of Greek myth makes neat schematization an impossible task (although some ancient writers such as Apollodorus attempted it!), and the figure of Medea is particularly frustrating in this respect” (2006, 9).

Regardless of the “fluid nature” of both the Greek myth and Medea’s personification in literary texts and the arts throughout the ages since its early inception, one aspect of her figure which invariably remains fixed is the fact of her persona being a female. However, despite the fact that her sexed form as a female is fixed, the precariousness of her identity and especially her gender has been widely addressed and inquired into by many critics and scholars. To begin on illustrating this point, it should be noted that Nita Krevans’ paper “Medea as Foundation-Heroine” stated that “her (Medea’s) ambiguous status appears everywhere” (Krevans 1997). And relating to this issue, Griffiths has also brought attention to the question of Medea’s identity suggesting that “Medea’s story fits into overlapping areas of debate, particularly those connected with the definition of identity” (Griffiths 2006, 59). Moving further from issues and questions of status and identity, Griffiths went on to raise concerns on Medea’s gender situation stating that “we should note that the truth of gender stereotypes is challenged in the play” (Griffiths 2006, 74). This gender stereotyping refers to the notion of a fixation of Medea’s female sexed form to conventions and expectations of the “woman” gender. Gender and feminist scholars have argued that gender is not a natural attribution of a sex and is an artificial construct established mainly by prevailing social and cultural standards. In support of this reasoning, Judith Butler has constantly stressed and demarcated the link between gender and sex stating that “gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex” (2010, 8).

Previous studies that have discussed Medea’s gender positioning in textual sources have mostly conceded that the Medea figure portrayed a gender that is both ambiguous and complex ensuing from the notion that she embodied the possibility of being either the woman or man persona. At this point it should be noted that the terminological distinction between the terms woman/man and female/male denotes a distinction between gender and sex respectively. This perplexity of Medea’s gendering has been discerned by Griffiths as a gendering with an unstable association to the sexed body. Griffiths based this notion of Medea’s gendering on her actions:

*Her (Medea) actions in taking violent revenge are more commonly associated with the masculine gender, so once again she provides an example of the problems of negotiating identity, of where to draw boundaries. (Griffiths 2006, 62)*

Nita Krevan’s attribution of Medea to “powerful, masculine roles, incompatible with the female fertility” in her article “Medea as Foundation-Heroine” (1997), Helene Foleys’ discussions on Medea’s masculinity in “Medea’s Divided Self” (Clauss 1997, 331), Marianne McDonald in her article “Medea as Politician and Diva: Riding the Dragon into the Future” (1997) mentioned of S.A.Barlow who “sees Medea as reversing the stereotype of the passive female” (Clauss 1997, 300), are some examples of studies amongst others that have recognised the dichotomous and indistinctness nature of Medea’s gender situation in various texts surrounding her myth. Ensuing from this point, it would be possible to posit that the gendering situation of Medea’s image representation will be of no exception if her gendering is already being ambiguously constituted in the texts. In other words, the problems of negotiating Medea’s gender identity, as addressed by Griffiths above, is also evidential in its image form. But even though today the Medea myth pervades widely in the image culture throughout the world and has developed into varieties of forms far beyond its early Greek origins, there are hardly any substantial specific and in depth studies on situating the positioning of Medea’s gender in her image representations. Gendering issues relating to the figure of Medea has merely been addressed in studies of textual sources of the myth and theatrical performances of the tragedy. Amongst some few existing scholarship specifically on Medea’s image representation includes studies of early Greek and Roman artefacts depicting Medea and her iconography notably by Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood in her paper “Medea at a Shifting Distance: Images and Euripidean Tragedy” (1997) and M.Schmidt’s article “Medeia” (Clauss and Johnston 1997, 344). Moreover, Griffiths has also mentioned in her book “Medea” (2006) of several other studies on Medea’s role in the artistic tradition from Greece to Rome in U.Reinhardt’s article “Die Kindermörderin im Bild. Beispiele aus der Kunsttradition als Ergänzung literarischer Texte zum Medea-mythos” (2000) and studies of Medea’s role on Roman sarcophagi in

P.Zanker and B.C. Ewald's "Mit Mythen Leben. Die Bilderwelt der römischen Sarkophage" (2004, Chp. 2). Despite these studies of Medea's role in her images, none have substantially explored issues of Medea's gender positioning in the representation of her images. Even though there are plenty of images depicting varying interpretations of the Medea figure today, there are no studies on how the gender ambivalence of Medea in the text corresponds to and consequently affect the gender positioning in the images of Medea. Both the internet and major bibliographic resources have attested to the lack of scholarship on Medea's gendering in her image representation. Therefore, to briefly state, studies have identified Medea's gender ambivalence in the text but not in her image representation.

In order to inquire into Medea's gendering of her image representations, her gendering situation in texts need to be looked into as well. However, most of the past studies that have dealt with the issue of Medea's gender ambivalence in the texts did not demonstrate a thorough investigation of Medea's gender situation. They were merely uncovering and maneuvering textually around the paradoxical and polysemic nature of the Medea figure in the texts. Moreover, these studies were not purely devised within the context of gender studies and hence not an in-depth study on gendering of Medea. These past studies were mostly unsupported by theories relating to gender discourse as well as not taking into account the politics of gender identity involving issues of culture, race, class and religion which would in turn inform and support the study further. However, Griffiths in her book "Medea" (2006) mentioned that there are some scholarships which dealt on gender issues and the Greek myth. L.E. Doherty's "Gender and the Interpretation of Classical Myth" (2001) is a study on, according to Griffiths "theories of mythology from an explicitly feminist standpoint", N. Demand's "Birth, Death and Motherhood in Classical Greece" (1994) which dealt on women's position in Greece, D.M. Halperin, Winkler and Zeitlin (eds) "Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World" (1990) explored on ideas surrounding sexuality and gender in Greece, are some examples given by Griffiths. However, most of these past studies that have approached the ambivalent nature of Medea's gender are generally a critiquing of Medea's perversion of the sexual norm or the extent of conforming to the conventions of being a woman. They have revealed that either the figure of Medea does not agree to the ideas of being female as well as not a normal woman or comparing the standard notions of being a woman with Medea's so called 'unwomanly' figure. "She committed the absolutely unwomanly act of killing her children" (Clauss & Johnston 1997, 8), "Medea in powerful, masculine roles incompatible with female fertility" (Krevans 1997), "hints of divinity and gender inversion are found in most of the stories about Medea and foundations" (Krevans 1997), are some examples of scholars' evaluation of Medea's anomaly as a woman. On the other hand, there are some other examples of scholars' imposition of the notion of a 'normal' woman onto the figure of Medea:

*Medea is also typical of all women, including Greek women, and exceptional only in the degree to which she represents female traits and dangerous potentialities. (O'Higgins 1997, 122)*

*She describes herself to the women of Corinth not as best, rock, or wave, but simply as a poor creature in many respects like themselves – a woman. (Boedeker 1997, 133)*

*She is also a woman and this adds to her power. (McDonald 1997, 303)*

Referring to the above statements in terms of locating Medea's gender, the idea of "typical of all women", "Greek women", "unwomanly act", "female fertility" were not supported by informed definition of what these scholars meant by the term 'woman' or 'female'. In this case it is apparent that nowhere in their studies did these scholars substantiate their meaning of the term 'woman' when analyzing and critiquing Medea's gendering. These scholars have fixed and confused the idea of gender to sex relationship, and consequently gauged Medea's gendering and its ambivalence solely based on non-distinctive gender/sex constructs as well as unsupported evaluations of gendering referring to baseless idea of the term 'woman' and 'female'.

### **3. The Gendered Body as Performative Subject**

At this point, Medea's gender ambivalence has been gauged based on notions of normative gender/sex constructs. Gender and sex have been approached by past scholars on Medea as indistinctive, and therefore have determined Medea's gender deviation from an expected norm solely based on standards of artificial constructs of constitution of the gender/sex norm which gender studies have challenged. These studies need

to be reproached and subsequently Medea's gender positioning in text to be re-evaluated based on theoretical framework that is contextualised within discourse of gender studies before corresponding further to Medea's gendering in her image representations.

In order to fully address the complexities surrounding Medea's gendered body, we proposed for the subject to be analysed through the notion of performativity as developed by Judith Butler, which posits gender as a "surface signification" (2010, 192) as well as an act, i.e. "performative", "Gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (2010, XV). It can thus be inferred that "gender performative" is a form of "surface signification" since the act itself is manifested through the "gendered stylization of the body". From this idea it would be possible to infer that gender can be seen and hence would be palpable on the surface of the body itself and subsequently its image representation as well. Therefore, the constitution and institution of Medea's gendering and its ambiguity can be derived and consequently interrogated further by locating the "gendered stylization" of Medea's body as imagined in images within its "surface signification". In other words, by referring to Butler's theory of gender performativity, it would be possible to justify the approach of identifying Medea's gendering as a visual signification and subsequently opening possibility of investigating the ambivalence of her figure's gendering. To illustrate, according to Margaret Williamson's article "A Woman's Place in Euripides' Medea", drawing from Sally Humphreys and John Gould's notion of the private and public space in ancient Greece, the act of Medea entering the public space, known as the "polis", and speaking is a man's act. Hence Medea transposes her gestures to become and cater to the standardized notion of gestures of a man. To translate this point in context of gender performativity, it is clear that Medea's occupation and act of speaking in the public space is an iteration "in accord with certain sanctions and proscriptions"<sup>1</sup> of man's socio-cultural context in ancient Greece. Butler defined this kind of event as the "collective dimensions" of the performative<sup>2</sup>. From this point, it would be possible to identify the semiotical and subsequently its visual image manifestations of Medea's act and gestures of occupancy and speech in public space in order to derive and translate her imagined gendering situation.

Interrogating Medea's gender positioning in its contemporary image representations and corresponding texts can inform further on the contemporary situation of gender formation and further contribute to current knowledge related to feminist theorists' assertion that gender is a cultural construct. Butler maintains this assertion further by stating that "feminist theorists claim that gender is the cultural interpretation of sex or that gender is culturally constructed" (2010). This cultural interpretation and imposition on gendering have become intrinsic in various cultural products amongst which are various forms of visual images that to a certain extent inadvertently customise standards of gendering. The gendering of the female/male sex that have proliferated throughout various visual mediums contain the potential to shape varying impressions and in turn influencing the masses on the notion of gender with an allusion to normal constitution of gender/sex pairing which is commonly accorded by feminist and gender theorists as illusive. In other words, images of conventional and cultural gendering of the sex that permeate the visual world would most likely influence on how we are subjected to the world and its gendering ideals. This idea is in line with John Berger's linking the act of seeing with positioning oneself in the world, "it is seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world" (1977). Hence, the various images of gendering of both the female and male sex are no exception in becoming objects which the female and male sex would depend on for its gendering identification.

Moreover, in addition to further informing on feminists' argument that gender is culturally constructed, the output of this study could contribute to answering Butler's question on "how and where does the construction of gender take place?" (Butler 2010, 11). What is known from past studies is that Medea's gendering is ambiguous. As mentioned in the previous sections, these studies have based the idea of Medea's gender ambiguity on conventional paradigms of indistinctive constructs of gender/sex stereotyping. To briefly state, these studies did not establish the definition of woman/man gender clearly as a basis of

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" in *Theatre Journal*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), 519-531.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 526.

gauging Medea's gendering position. What is not known is the constitution of Medea's gendering within context of gender studies discourse as a re-evaluation of Medea's gendering in texts and subsequently its corresponding gendering in contemporary image representation. In other words, past studies that have addressed Medea's gendering need to be reassessed in light of the many explorations on the discourse on gender to date especially by feminist studies that have raised issues on gender/sex distinction and that gender is constructed instead of being a normative attribution of sex.

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