Mother, Monstrous: Motherhood, Grief, and the Supernatural in Marc-Antoine Charpentier's *Médée*

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It has been argued that the illustrations of the sublime provided by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) 'have provided something like a reader's guide to the Gothic novel', and that the 'vast cataracts, raging storms, lofty towers, dark nights, ghosts and goblins, serpents, madmen; mountains, precipices, dazzling light; low, tremulous, intermittent sounds, such as moans, sighs or whispers; immense, gloomy buildings; tyranny, incarceration, torture' that he describes provide some of the first images that might appear in one's mind at the mention of the word 'gothic'.[1] Although this is not an exhaustive list of tropes in either case, it is noteworthy that Burke's description might also be considered as a reader's guide to opera. While opera sees 'moans, sighs, and whispers' replaced with ostentatious displays of vocal and instrumental prowess, works within the genre have made copious use of the sublime landscapes, supernatural appearances, intrigue, tales of terror, torment, and predation that served as the technology of early gothic fiction.[2] From its inception in the seventeenth century, opera has been synonymous with the fantastical and grotesque, its depictions of which have since formed the subject of countless aesthetic and critical discussions.[3] Although the origins of the gothic novel and the opera differ significantly, a shared lineage can be found in their use of folklore, fairy-tales, and mythologies. Investigations of early operatic texts reveal prominent intersections with the gothic, and, while not exclusively gothic in themselves, the examination of operatic texts through a gothic lens can provide illuminating insights into the relationships between literary and musical texts.

The operatic 'text' can be somewhat difficult to pin down as an object for critical discussion and enquiry. Comprising a written dramatic text (libretto), musical setting, and often elaborate stage design, machinery, and choreography, in creation and production the opera is a largely collaborative process. While the present study focuses primarily on the

[1] David B. Morris, 'Gothic Sublimity', *New Literary History*, 16.2 (Winter 1985), 299-319 (pp. 300-01).
[2] Frederick S. Frank, 'Preface' to *Guide to the Gothic: An Annotated Bibliography of Criticism* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. ix-xvi (p. x).
[3] Aubrey S. Garlington, '"Le Merveilleux" and Operatic Reform in Eighteenth-Century French Opera', *The Musical Quarterly*, 49.4 (October 1963), 484-97 (p. 484).

notated musical score and libretto of *Médée* – by Marc-Antoine Charpentier and Thomas Corneille respectively – it must be noted that the opera, no less than any other musical or theatrical form, is greater than the sum of its written parts. Having been performed, *Médée* can be conceived of as a historical event and so must also be considered in terms of performance, reception, and the historical context of its creation. Such considerations are of particular import when considering the experiential element of the operatic text, the multimodality of which affords a capacity for the spectacular that defined much of its early history. The creation/evocation of wonder in the audience through the application of music, spectacular costume, and stage design and machinery – most often used for the appearance of supernatural characters or deities – characterises early operatic works. The first performance of Luigi Rossi's *Orfeo* in Paris on 2 March 1647 saw scenery built that included fortresses, forests, and the Gardens of the Sun, with personifications of Victory and the Sun himself descending in flying chariots to sing to rapt audiences.[4] The United Company in London poured between a third and a half of its annual working budget into the first performance of Henry Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* in 1692, which – though a Restoration dramatick opera rather than an opera in the continental sense – had all the scenic trappings of its French and Italian cousins, including but not limited to articulated dragons, swans transforming into fairies, the rising sun and mist, in addition to its resplendent musical performers and dance corps.[5]

The effects created in such works are often referred to as *les merveilleux* (the marvellous), a term traditionally associated with similar appearances in poetic genres. Downing A. Thomas argues that the *tragédie en musique* – an early form of French opera – highlighted the visual *merveilleux* of supernatural appearances and special effects to a greater degree than any contemporary dramatic idiom.[6] Whether the fascination of the early-modern audience with supernatural topoi necessitated the need for spectacle, or the spectacular combination of dance, music, and drama of the opera invited their use is uncertain; however, Charles Perrault argued that opera fulfilled a unique function on the French stage, stating that, '[s]ince comedy was based on truth and since the tragedy was a combination of both truth and some facet of the marvelous, it was necessary that one genre be devoted to the marvelous entirely'.[7]

[4] Donald Jay Grout, 'Some Forerunners of the Lully Opera', *Music and Letters*, 22.1 (January 1941), 1-25 (p. 8).
[5] Bruce Wood, *Purcell: An Extraordinary Life* (London: ABRSM, 2009), p. 149.
[6] Downing A. Thomas, 'Opera, Dispossession, and the Sublime: The Case of "Armide"', *Theatre Journal*, 49.2 (May 1997), 168-88 (p. 170).
[7] Garlington, p. 485.

The subject of 'fascination and revulsion' to the seventeenth-century French audience, opera occupied an uncanny nexus between old and new, the familiar and the unfamiliar.[8] Adhering to the Aristotelian tenet that the only permissible position for the marvellous is within an epic, early French opera drew heavily from classical mythology and literary traditions, the new operatic *merveilleux* occupying much the same position as its poetic progenitor.[9] Populated by gods, goddesses, Furies, demons, and witches, the operatic stage was one on which objects of fear and awe could run rampant. These beings were depicted in a manner that was in keeping with their classical origins, while simultaneously reflecting the ideologies of the period. Charpentier's *Médée*, which premiered at Théâtre du Palais-Royal on 4 December 1693, sees one such depiction in its titular character. The work sees the Medea myth adapted in its libretto by Thomas Corneille, and presents the notorious sorceress as an operatic anti-heroine.[10] In her 1994 Reith lecture series, Marina Warner describes Medea as having embodied 'extreme female aberration' from the fifth century to present day, her character being continually adapted to reflect the changing images of the 'bad mother' as time has progressed.[11] I suggest in this article that Médée (Medea) as she appears in Charpentier's opera is one such adaptation, and that her maternal failings are intrinsically linked to her engagement with the supernatural, reflecting seventeenth-century beliefs of the sorceress as morally and physically corrupt.

The pages that follow establish Charpentier's Médée as the synthesis of classical and native literary and folkloric traditions, a figure who, while representative of a well-established literary and theatrical tradition, simultaneously embodies many aspects of seventeenth-century occult philosophy. Although the opera is arguably a 'pre-gothic' text, I demonstrate that the depiction of monstrous motherhood in *Médée* displays a high degree of commonality with the 'unnatural mothers' of gothic fiction, and that the dissonant imagery that characterises Médée as such is evident formally and thematically in both libretto and musical text. Finally, I interrogate Médée's liminal position within the opera, and position her alongside contemporary conceptions of the sorceress as a liminal figure. The exploration of Médée's multi-faceted character in this way illustrates the close connections between gothic

[8] Thomas, p. 168.
[9] Edmond Lemaître, 'Préface', in *Médée: Tragédie en musique*, ed. by Lemaître (Paris: Editions du Centre de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987), pp. vii-xviii (p. vii).
[10] Paulo Russo and Mary Ann Smart, 'Visions of Medea: Musico-Dramatic Transformations of a Myth', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 6.2 (July 1994), 113-24 (p. 113).
[11] Marina Warner, *Managing Monsters: Six Myths of Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 6.

literature and the operatic tradition, and emphasises the valuable insights that can be gained by adopting an interdisciplinary approach to musicological study.

Médée is but one opera that exemplifies the convergence of ancient aesthetics with seventeenth-century beliefs. Refashioning the works of Seneca and Euripides – as his brother Pierre was to do in the 1635 dramatic tragedy of the same name – Thomas Corneille's libretto follows the events surrounding Medea's most notorious act: the murder of her children. Dispossessed on account of her past acts of sorcery, Médée, princess of Colchis, and Jason, leader of the Argonauts and son of the king of Iolcus, take refuge in Corinth. Jason, having previously sworn himself to Médée – with whom he has fathered two sons – pursues an illicit relationship with Créuse, the princess of that land. Issued with the ultimatum to leave Corinth or be returned to her enemies by Créuse's father Créon – who favours the union of Créuse and Jason – Médée resolves to bring forth demons and punish those who have wronged her. Médée poisons a robe that she gifts to Créuse, summoning as she does the denizens of the underworld. After using her powers to drive Créon insane, Médée confronts Créuse and Jason, activating the robe's poisons with her wand, and leaving Créuse to expire in Jason's arms. As Jason swears revenge, Médée appear in a dragon-drawn chariot, declaring that she has slain their children, and exiting as the palace bursts into flames. Evidenced by its long literary and theatrical history, the tale of Medea is one that was familiar to the French audience, and was, as such, one that drew on a tradition of witchcraft or sorcery that was not entirely their own.[12] As a pre-existing literary and mythic figure, Médée can be regarded as something of a stock character or theatrical archetype, rather than as a representation of the sorceress as she may have existed in contemporary belief and popular discourse. However, the construction of Médée in Corneille and Charpentier's work nonetheless reflects sorcery beliefs of early-modern France. I argue, therefore, that Medée can be regarded as a composite figure, representing the synthesis of classical topoi and French superstition.

Magic, and those who practiced it, occupied a nebulous position in the early-modern psyche, and can largely be viewed as the product of two conflicting ideologies of magic: Christian demonology and folk belief. Aleksandra Pfau's 'Ritualised Violence against Sorcerers in Fifteenth-Century France' attests to the complexity of magical discourse within folk belief. She illustrates that, although the practice of magic was decried by church and state, common beliefs in magic defied categorisation into the Christian polarisation of 'good' and 'evil'. Regarded as a force to be wielded by individuals rather than the product of

[12] Russo and Smart, p. 114.

demonological ties, magic was seen as a commodity, those possessing 'magical' *techne* often becoming 'integral part[s] of the community' as healers.[13] Despite this, the seemingly 'neutral' force might, at the discretion of its wielder, be used to enact malicious magic (*maleficium*), thus identifying those in possession of magical knowledge as suspect. As such, magic could prove to be a double-edged sword, as Pfau's study illustrates, as the sorcerer could be both turned to and turned on by their communities in times of strife. By contrast, the Christian church regarded the actions of sorcerers, enchanters, and witches as the product of demonolatry, and those who performed them in league with the devil.[14]

While aspects of folk belief and the official beliefs of the religious hegemony were sometimes at odds, anxieties surrounding the female reproductive system characterise both. Medea, in all of her schizomythic iterations – including Charpentier's Médée – is a character freighted with cultural significance in relation to attitudes towards maternal instinct and anxiety. The murder of her children, which occurs offstage in Act 5 – presumably after her murder of Créuse in Act 5, Scene V – is more than an act of vengeance against Jason. Reflecting contemporary beliefs regarding witchcraft and reproduction, the murder establishes Médée as an 'antimother', one who, rather than creating life, extinguishes it.[15] This role is one that Médée herself acknowledges, proclaiming as she plots her children's death, 'Ah! Trop barbare mere!' ('Ah! Barbarous mother!) in Act 5, Scene I.[16] The roles of witch and mother were frequently juxtaposed in early-modern discourse, the witch becoming a figure onto which the fear of the female reproductive system and its workings – then perceived differently to our modern understanding of biology – were projected. As Clark Garrett suggests,

> In a world in which men make the rules, female sexuality creates a perpetual dilemma. As the vessels of biological mysteries of menstruation and lactation, as creatures of sexual passion, women are mistrusted, but as mothers, women are nurturers and preservers of society.[17]

Médée's subversion of the traits of motherhood – in committing both infanticide and regicide over the course of the opera, she preserves neither children nor society – becomes the driving

[13] Aleksandra Pfau, 'Ritualized Violence Against Sorcerers in Fifteenth-Century France', *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft*, 8.1 (2013), 50-71 (p. 67).
[14] Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 521.
[15] Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early-Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 99.
[16] Marc-Antoine Charpentier, *Médée: Tragedie Mise en Musique* (Paris: Christopher Ballard, 1893), p. 308. All further references to this text will be indicated via act and scene numbers in the body of the essay.
[17] Clark Garrett, 'Women and Witches: Patterns of Analysis', *Signs*, 3.2 (Winter 1977), 461-70 (p. 466).

force of the opera's narrative, typifying Ruth Bienstock Anolik's observation that 'a suitably evil mother can be quite useful in promoting the deviant Gothic plot'.[18] Diane Purkiss argues that these constructions of the witch as a sexual other were not merely the product of patriarchal ideologies, but also of female reproductive anxieties.[19] With much of Europe still lacking advancements in sanitary technology and management, childbirth was treacherous, infant mortality rates high, and infections such as mastitis common. The imagery associated with such infections – of bleeding, purulent breasts, misshapen bodily orifices, and bloody discharges – permeate tales of witchcraft, and in many cases, serve as the witch's identifying feature. Reports of 'witchmarks' range from descriptions of 'a teat from which her demonic familiar sucked', through hands disfigured from handling poisons, to the deformed mouths gained through diabolical prayer (although in reality it is likely that these marks may have been the product of sexually transmitted infections or similar illnesses).[20]

The deformity of the witch was not merely superficial, but internal. As Purkiss illustrates, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century beliefs that surrounded the female reproductive system depicted the womb, circulatory system, and mammary glands as connected in a far more literal sense than is recognised by our current understanding. Believed to be purified blood, breast milk was the palatable parallel to menstrual excretion, the breasts and womb being the sites of exit. Unable to purify blood into milk, the witch's body was, rather than a source of nourishment for an infant, a source of pollution.[21] As Purkiss puts it,

> Flowing from mother to child, breast-milk integrates the child's sucking mouth into the tidal and alarming flows and ebbs of the maternal body. The vulnerable newborn is fed with a substance whose provenance must be doubtful: the poison bag of the female body.[22]

This mother-child pollution was not limited to that occurring after birth, as 'medical and popular knowledge alike affirmed the power of the mother's thoughts and feelings to shape the child *in utero*', meaning that the physical and mental soundness of the child were dependent on that of the mother.[23] Although the acceptance of accusations of witchcraft or

[18] Ruth Bienstock Anolik, 'The Missing Mother: The Meanings of Maternal Absence in the Gothic Mode', *Modern Language Studies*, 33.1/2 (Spring-Autumn 2003), 24-43 (p. 28).
[19] Purkiss, p. 97.
[20] Amanda Eubanks Winkler, *O Let Us Howle Some Heavy Note: Music for Witches, the Melancholic, and the Mad on the Seventeenth-Century English Stage* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 20; and Stephanie Irene Spoto, 'Jacobean Witchcraft and Feminine Power', *Pacific Coast Philology*, 45 (2010), 53-70 (p. 59).
[21] Purkiss, p. 134.
[22] Ibid, p. 132.
[23] Ibid, p. 100.

self-fashioning as a witch might have afforded women agency, the prevalence of beliefs regarding bodily pollution and deformity might similarly have had detrimental effects on early-modern mothers, resulting in self-abjection, or the belief that one was monstrous, or the victim of *maleficium*.[24]

In Charpentier's opera, although Médée's children are past infancy, the question of pollution is still a prevalent one. In this case, however, the pollution is perceived by Médée as originating in their father. In Act 5, Scene I she agonises over her plot to commit infanticide, her conflict of interests – as loving mother, or vengeful sorceress – epitomised in the lyric 'c'est mon sang, il est vray, mais c'est le sang d'un traitre' ('It is my blood, it is true, but it is the blood of a traitor'), illustrated in Figure 1. In other words, Médée, although acknowledging her own barbarity and dysfunction as a mother – as discussed above – sees Jason's blood as a greater pollutant, his infidelity a less desirable inheritance than her own ruthlessness. Margarita Georgieva notes that 'gothic children are marked by the sins of their fathers and are supposed to pay for them'. While Georgieva notes that this is resolved in the child's either choosing to follow in their father's footsteps or overcome their inherited sin in a life of virtue, no such resolution exists in *Médée*.[25] As Médée's children do not receive any characterisation of their own – they have no scripted lines, and function primarily to highlight the maternal and paternal roles of Médée and Jason – their very identity in the eyes of the audience is determined by Médée. They can, as a result, be regarded as more of an abstract concept of 'the child' than characters in their own right, passive inhabitants of the world, whose existence and functions are outlined by the adults around them. Depicted as without force or agency of their own, for Médée's children, Georgieva's 'resolution' of paternal sin through self-determination is impossible. As a result, their sin is absolved in a manner similar to instances of child sacrifice within the gothic novel. For Georgieva, '[t]he gothic proposes scenarios in which children are sacrificed in the name of faith (a means to transform polluted conceptions into purified deaths) or given away to the Church as gifts in an attempt to expiate sin'.[26] Médée's acknowledgement of her own failings suggests that the mere expiation of the sin or pollution within her children is not sufficient, and that, to a lesser extent than their father, she herself is a pollutant. Médée's children, as faceless templates for innocence, serve as a mirror for the horrific actions of their mother. As will be explored further below, Médée's murder of her children can be regarded as her abandonment of the mortal plane and

[24] See Purkiss, p. 145.
[25] Margarita Georgieva, *The Gothic Child* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 94.
[26] Ibid, p. 95.

ascension to divinity. Considered as a 'sacrifice', her act of infanticide may be regarded as one of ceremonial cleansing – of her polluted children, and of herself from her toxicity as a mother.

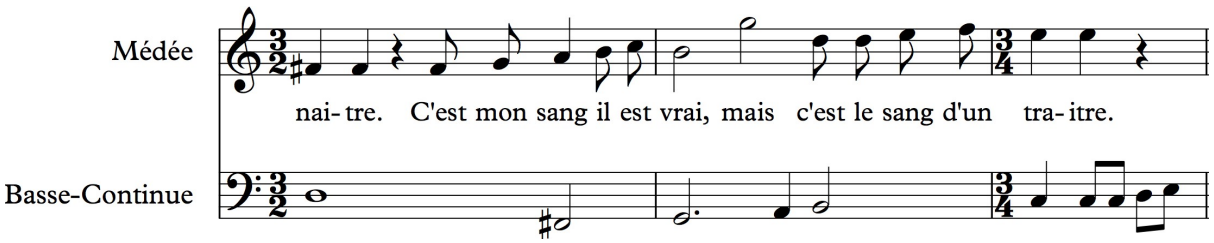

Fig. 1: *Médée*, Act 5, Scene I, bars 40-42.[27]

Despite Médée's perception that Jason's treacherous blood pollutes her children with what Alaya H. Gabriel refers to as 'a paternal disease', it is entirely possible that, to the seventeenth-century audience, the opposite was considered true.[28] While little in the libretto indicates that Médée was perceived as physically grotesque, her actions evoke the image of a cold and calculating murderess, so morally deficient as to rejoice in the torture and murder of Créuse and Créon, and to describe watching the suffering of her children as 'sweet' (Figure 2). In the excerpt illustrated below, which concludes Médée's monologic aria in Act 5, Scene I, the delivery of the line 'can I pay too dearly in causing them to perish, for the sweetness, the sweetness of seeing them suffer?' suggests a manic excitement at the prospect of vengeance, even at the cost of her children's lives. Structurally, the repetition of 'la douceur' suggests a fixation on the idea, which is reinforced in Charpentier's musical setting by the use of rising pitch and the contrapuntal movement between voice and continuo. The repetition of 'la douceur' sees oblique motion between bass and vocal line, with the bass moving from a tenth between d and f" to a ninth between e and f". The effect that this creates at first appears to contradict the word that is being intoned; rather than hearing the 'sweetness' that Médée suggests that she would feel at the suffering of her children, the audience experiences only dissonance. This can be interpreted as a sonic representation of Médée's psychomachia, her intonations betraying an internal conflict or uncertainty as to her own resolve. However, the immediate return to consonance suggests that she has reached a resolution, the sweetness of her devious acts seemingly cemented in thought as it is voiced in the sweetness of sonic

[27] All musical examples that appear in this article are reductions of the score as it appears in Marc-Antoine Charpentier, *Médée: Tragedie en musique*, ed. by Lemaître (Paris: Editions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1987).
[28] Ayala H. Gabriel, 'Living with Medea and Thinking after Freud: Greek Drama, Gender, and Concealments', *Cultural Anthropology*, 7.3 (August 1992), 346-73 (p. 364).

consonance, culminating in the perfect resolution of bar 48. Additionally, though momentary, the jarring effect of the dissonance might evoke an embodied response in its listener, inviting, if not quite the jump-scare response of a 'stinger' in a Hollywood soundtrack, then at least an increased focus on the disturbed nature of Médée's machinations.

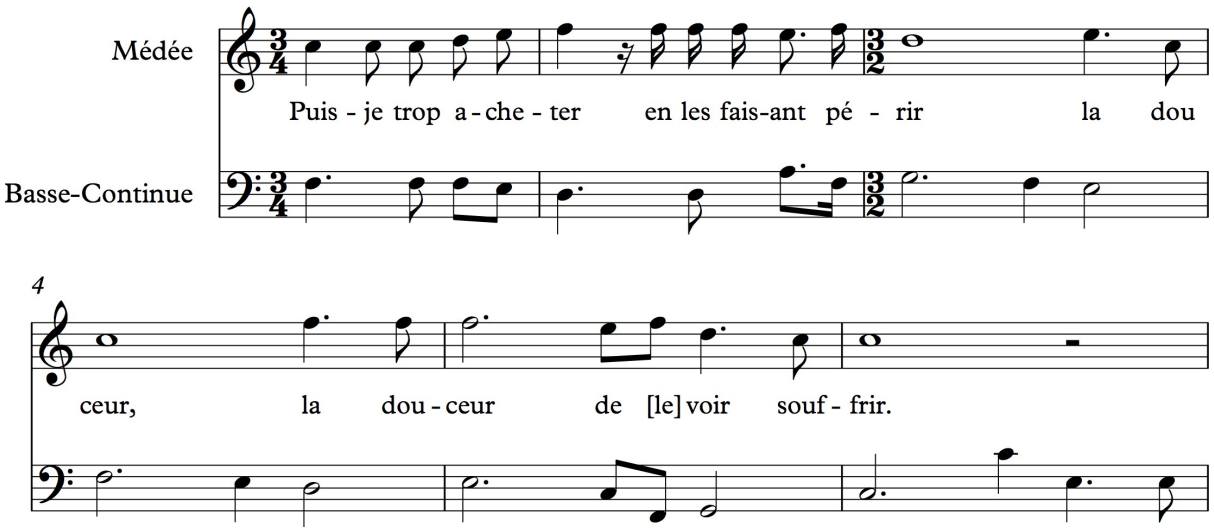

Fig. 2: *Médée*, Act 5, Scene I, 43-48.

The moral deficiencies of the mother in the case of *Médée* are such as to destabilise her very humanity. Médée's glee expressed at the prospect of murdering her children in the above passage, and the lack of remorse expressed following her completion of the act, are, from the point of view of the Christian binary of good and evil, damning in a literal sense. However, Médée's declaration of her infanticide in the opera's final act can be read in numerous ways. Act 5, Scene VII sees Jason, alone, declare his intent to avenge the dead Créuse, and attempting to conceive a plot, when he is interrupted by his scorned wife (whose appearance heralds the beginning of Scene VIII). Appearing astride a dragon in flight, Médée announces that, in addition to seeking vengeance for Créuse, he must also do so for his sons. Proclaiming that his wish for vengeance shall come to naught, Médée exits the opera in the spectacular fashion described below:

> Médée fend les Airs sur son Dragon & en mesme tempes les Statues & autres ornements du Palais se brisent. On voir sortir des Demons de tous côtez, qui ayant des feux à la main embrasement ce mesme Palais. Ces Demons disparoissent une nuit se forme & cet édifice ne paroist plus que ruine & monstres, après quoy il tombe une pluye de feu.
>
> Médée cleaves the air on her dragon and at the same time the statues and other ornaments of the Palace disintegrate. Demons appear from all sides carrying fire in

> their hands and set the palace ablaze. The Demons vanish, night falls and the edifice is no more than ruins and monsters, after which a hail of fire descends.[29]

Nancy Tuana suggests that, to a greater extent than is the case with any other of her historical iterations, 'the image of Medea which most horrifies the modern reader is that of the mother with the bloody sword'.[30] The bloody sword, or in this case, dagger, is of particular interest, as it implies that the murder of Médée's sons was not wrought by magic, as all other murders and evils enacted by the sorceress over the course of the opera were. By eschewing her supernatural modus operandi, Médée sets the murder of her children apart from those of her enemies.

While this may be regarded as a minor detail, it is nonetheless significant, as Médée's previous misdemeanours are inherently linked to her identification as a sorceress. In addition to Médée's summoning of demonic forces in Act 3, Scene VII – adhering to the early-modern Christian perception of magic practice as demonolatry – her use of poisons in the assassination of Créuse is tied to period definitions of occult practices. While the enactment of magical *maleficium* could take many forms, cultural historian Keith Thomas notes that 'the use of poisons features prominently in discussions of seventeenth-century magical practice, with sorcery being defined in Blagrave's *Astrological Practice of Physick* (1671) as the use of poisons'.[31] In 'Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early-Modern Community', Edward Bever finds that a large number of witchcraft allegations in the period were based on similar use of poisons.[32] As illustrated above, the character of Médée is trapped within a dichotomy, vacillating between sorcery and motherhood, defined perpetually as a 'bad mother' for those acts of evil that manifest in her magical engagements and subsequent moral deformity. As her rejection by the people of Thessaly and Corinth suggests, the position of the sorceress in the operatic world of *Médée* was akin to that of the witch in the early-modern community. Despite occupying a position of both fear and respect on account of her magical *techne*, Médée is nonetheless regarded by those around her as spiritually corrupt, as a result of her magical actions, as Créon's reproaches in Act 2, Scene I illustrate:

[29] Charpentier, *Médée*, Les Arts Florissants (CS Harmonia Mundi, HMC 901139. 1, 1984), pp. 116-17 (CD booklet).
[30] Nancy Tuana, 'MEDEA: With the Eyes of the Lost Goddess', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 68.2 (Summer 1985), 253-72 (p. 253).
[31] Thomas, p. 520.
[32] Edward Bever, 'Witchcraft, Female Aggression, and Power in the Early-Modern Community', *Journal of Social History*, 35.4 (Summer 2002), 955-88 (p. 959).

Ignorez-vous qu'un murmure odieux
Vous faites par tout croire coupable.

Do you not know that an odious rumour
Makes people everywhere believe you have committed a crime.

En vain sur ce Hero vous rejettez la haine
Qui ne doit tomber que sur vous.

In vain upon this hero you cast the shame
Which must fall upon you alone.[33]

Additionally, as Ayala H. Gabriel argues, Medea's rejection by Jason renders her 'socially liminal', and of a reduced social status.[34] In engaging with the demons and spirits from whom her magic stems, Médée interacts with that which is not of the mortal world, and she is tainted by association. Despite her human physicality, Médée can be regarded as something other than human. She is, therefore, a wholly liminal figure; neither human nor inhuman, her very existence flies in the face of nature, or in the face of the post-pagan philosophy of moral polarity.

The question of Médée's humanity is therefore intrinsically linked to the murder of her children. On the one hand, the infanticide could be regarded as monstrous, heralding the abandonment of her humanity, and the shedding of her final tie to the mortal realm. Conversely, it could be viewed as her final act of humanity. It has been suggested that Médée's motivation for the murder of her children is, rather than an act of vengeance against Jason, an act of mercy, an attempt to save them from a life of persecution resulting from the actions of their mother.[35] Regardless of the motivation behind it, the manner in which she perpetrates the murder is significant. Prior to this, all acts of *maleficium* by Médée have been horrifying deployments of *les merveilleux*, and have shown the sorceress' capacity for torture. In Act 4, Scene VIII, she summons the spirit of Madness to curse Créon – whose suicide is subsequently announced in Act 5, Scene III. In Act 3, Scene III, having summoned forth Vengeance, Jealousy, and a host of demons, she poisons a robe that she gifts to Créuse. When activated by her wand in Act 5, Scene IV, it causes Créuse an agonising, fiery death, which lasts until the conclusion of Act 5, Scene VI. In choosing instead a mortal weapon for the murder of her children, Médée establishes their final interaction as an intimate one, rather than a detached piece of *maleficium*. In an opera characterised by its employment of *les*

[33] Charpentier, *Médée*, CD Booklet, pp. 56-59.
[34] Gabriel, p. 352.
[35] Marianne Hopman, 'Revenge and Mythopoesis in Euripides's *Medea*', *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 138.1 (Spring 2008), 155-83 (p. 175).

merveilleux, Médée's murder of her sons is understated for the simple reason that it is the act of a mortal mother. For this reason, Médée's murder of her children can be read as the symbolic destruction of her maternal self, a surrender to the supernatural anti-mother that her grief has driven her to become.

Medée's surrender of her humanity also calls for a change to the space she occupies. Throughout the opera, Médée has occupied a liminal space within the human realm, defined by her magical abilities. In the opera's final act, however, this positioning changes. As the above stage direction details, Médée appears in the air, astride a dragon. In *Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France: Stages and Histories*, Amy Wygant states of the anti-heroine in the finale of Euripides' *Medea* that 'she appears at the end in the theatrical space reserved for the gods'.[36] The same can be said of Corneille and Charpentier's adaptation. By placing Médée literally above her former husband, the opera shows her to have ascended from the human realm; just as the murders signal the death of her maternal self, here, she is shown relinquishing her ties to the earth and the laws – both physical and moral – that govern it.

In his examination of the Medea myth, Aristide Tessitore describes this process as Medea's becoming a god.[37] While her position as a witch or sorceress is a liminal one, and one that sets her apart from the opera's inhabitants, a knowledge of her mythic origins tells us more of her occupation of the supernatural space, and supports Tessitore's argument. The granddaughter of the sun god Helios, Médée's mythical lineage is such as to imply that she is more than merely human.[38] In Act 4, Scene IV, Médée describes herself thus:

> Au pouvoir de Médée il n'est rien de semblable.
> Elle asservit la terre,
> Elle Commande aux Cieux.
>
> Nothing resembles the power of Médée.
> She subdues the Earth,
> She commands the Heavens.[39]

This indicates an awareness on her part that she occupies a preternatural role in the world that she inhabits. Whether god or sorceress, Médée's placement in the final act of the opera implies that she has been liberated from the bonds of the human world, and from the familial and emotional ties that once held her to it.

[36] Amy Wygant, *Medea, Magic, and Modernity in France: Stages and Histories, 1553-1797* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2007), p. 4.
[37] Aristide Tessitore, 'Euripide's *Medea* and the Problem of Spiritedness', *The Review of Politics*, 53.4 (Autumn 1991), 587-601 (p. 592).
[38] Tuana, p. 256.
[39] Charpentier, *Médée*, CD booklet, pp. 94-95.

Médée's 'ascension' in the opera's final act can be regarded as yet another parallel to witchcraft discourse and beliefs in the seventeenth century. As I have illustrated, the construction of witchcraft in the early-modern period – a construction which continues to persist to this day – relied heavily upon the mystification of the female body and on depictions of corruption associated with female bodies and bodily processes. Depictions of witches and sorceresses onstage, in popular discourse, and in literature stressed the inversion of those features associated with maternal nourishment and nurturing, as these very features become the source of unknowable destructive power. 'The witch', states Eubanks Winkler, 'could chart her own sexual destiny outside of the traditional procreative family unit', a sentiment that is embodied in *Médée*.[40] Indeed, throughout opera's history, the woman as sorceress or temptress – roles that often go hand in hand – frequently faces punishment for having exerted her power over men; one need only consider Jean-Baptiste Lully's *Atys* (1676), Vincenzo Bellini's *Norma* (1831), or Richard Strauss's *Salome* (1905).[41] By allowing Médée to escape, Charpentier and Corneille avoid moralising responses to her character, and thus grant her agency. While Médée's engagement with sorcery renders her morally and spiritually incompatible with seventeenth-century ideals of motherhood, Médée is, rather than damned, liberated by her actions, permitted an existence outside of civilised society amongst the supernatural, occupying a position similar to that occupied by the witch in the contemporary imagination.

Médée, though not a wholly gothic text, illustrates the parallels that operatic texts often share with gothic literary works, and specifically in relation to manifestations of monstrous motherhood. Although the relationship between the gothic and opera is perhaps most apparent in works from the nineteenth century to the present day – Charles Gounod's *La nonne sanglante* (loosely based on Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*) (1854), Benjamin Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* (1954), Bernard Herrmann's *Wuthering Heights* (1951) and Mark-Anthony Turnage's recent adaptation of *Coraline* (2018) are but a few examples – this examination illustrates some of the insights that can be gained from approaching earlier operatic works through gothic frameworks. In doing so, I hope to promote the further application of interdisciplinary approaches to the analysis of early musico-theatrical forms.

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[40] Winkler, p. 20.
[41] Thomas, p. 174.