



Project  
**MUSE**<sup>®</sup>

*Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.*

---

**Medea's Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who  
Kills**  
Bay-Cheng, Sarah.

Theatre Journal, Volume 56, Number 4, December 2004, pp. 726-727 (Review)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: 10.1353/tj.2004.0146



For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/tj/summary/v056/56.4bay-cheng.html>

in the free world, one wishes the book were simultaneously less celebratory in tone and more rigorous in its documentation. Fraden introduces her research techniques with great modesty: "In creating this book, I interviewed some people, they told me something about themselves, I saw some performances and workshops" (xiv). The bibliography indicates Fraden conducted at least twenty-one interviews, so one senses there was a bit more purposefulness to her method than she indicates. Fraden draws upon interviews by reproducing them in full, arguing that the book allows the women to "speak for themselves" (25). What is unclear is the basis upon which these particular interview subjects were selected and what guided her editorial hand as she chose the few voices featured here. I felt there are other, more critical voices that never get an airing. Throughout the book, Fraden alludes to Jones's critics, but there is little coverage of who these critics are and what they have to say. The closest Fraden comes to acknowledging an alternate, less rosy view of the Medea Project is a buried parenthetical reference to an interview with Karen Levine, a program coordinator of the San Francisco Jails. Levine says the Medea Project is premature: "I think they [the performers] get a lot into this whole glamorous thing of performing on the outside and being in a play and it's grandiose for where they're at" (134). Fraden's positive assessment of the Medea Project would have been more persuasive had she incorporated such criticisms more fully and walked the reader through refutations and counter-arguments. As it stands, the book lapses into and is weakened by a congratulatory, hagiographic tone. One also wonders about the reception of the Medea Project plays, both by audiences and by San Francisco critics. Efficacy is notoriously difficult to document in theatre for social change. How would one "prove" it works? Have the shows been reviewed? If so, what have those critics said? If the project has not been reviewed, why? Since Jones wants to "transform the way an audience traditionally performs" (205), reception would seem to be an important line of inquiry for a book of this sort.

These qualifications aside, *Imagining Medea* is a laudable book, one that conveys the vibrancy, courage, and vision of an artistic endeavor that brings the power of theatre to bear on what often seems an intractable problem: America's simultaneous disavowal of the incarcerated and skyrocketing rates of incarceration. Rhodessa Jones has brought theatre where many fear to tread, and Rena Fraden's book allows many more of us to witness that extraordinary journey.

CATHERINE M. COLE

*University of California, Santa Barbara*

**MEDEA'S DAUGHTERS: FORMING AND PERFORMING THE WOMAN WHO KILLS.** By Jennifer Jones. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003; pp. ix + 123. \$48.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.

At the heart of Jennifer Jones's study of murdering women is the argument that theatrical representation (popular songs, television, film, and theatre) can be effective tools for the study of cultural history. It is a compelling suggestion, particularly given the highly theatrical setting of the various courtrooms in which women accused of murder—Medea's daughters—are tried. Building on Ann Jones's history of American murderers, *Women Who Kill*, Jennifer Jones presents six case studies of the legal representations of female defendants alongside their dramatic recreations. Using an "analysis of theatrical representations of real-life murderers" (x), *Medea's Daughters* attempts to document the cultural contexts that create and punish such women according to dominant theories of femininity.

To this end, Jones begins by pointing to the disproportionate number of female murderers who receive widespread media attention—both journalistic and dramatic—versus the far greater number of male murderers who go largely unnoticed. In her initial study of sixteenth-century England, for example, Jones asks, "If, in fact, wives were far less likely to murder their husbands than to be murdered by them, what accounts for the popularity and longevity of Alice Arden and other petty treason narratives?" (3). Though the obvious answer seems to be that deviance from normative behavior is always more theatrical than the commonplace, Jones argues that the very notion of deviant women (originally, Medea) specifically was created to stabilize mainstream convictions. In other words, deviance is useful as a legal and theatrical strategy to reinforce prevailing perceptions, regardless of their accuracy. Using legal histories and newspaper accounts, Jones correlates the emergence of murdering women in popular culture with "times of feminist activity because they contain anxiety about gender roles, and, in so doing, deflect attention away from the systematic repression of women" (xiii). Jones thus encourages the reader to view the women she presents on two distinct levels: first, to see such women as operating within, and at times, violently opposing a repressive social system; and also, as cultural creations, warning men against similarly deviant women.

Jones chooses her examples well. Strongest among them are Ruth Snyder, whose trial Sophie Treadwell adapted in *Machinal* (1928), and Francine Hughes,

the source for the television movie, *The Burning Bed* (1984). Both instances occur against a historical backdrop of women's rights—the “new woman” of the 1920s and the feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s—and both women stand trial for the murder of their respective husbands in a highly publicized venue. Jones reads each case on several distinct levels: the performance of testimony and argument in the trial; the representation of the women in the popular media during the trial; and the subsequent dramatization of the story. Not surprisingly, Jones greatly favors Treadwell's adaptation, which, she argues, undermines the depiction of Snyder as deviant. Through expressionist form and the universal “Young Woman” protagonist, Treadwell challenges the essential deviance that Jones critiques in other less critical (and less experimental) representations.

Conversely, Jones sees the dramatic adaptation of Francine Hughes's story as a reinforcement of the feminine ideal, especially through its visual techniques. Although *The Burning Bed* is “Farrah Fawcett's movie” (62), the film does not attempt to tell the story of Hughes from the perspective of the accused, but rather exposes the character to the sometimes pitying, sometimes horrified view of the television viewer. Jones notes that the only time the camera allows the viewer to see horror on the faces of the jury during Hughes's trial is when they are listening to descriptions of the torment of the family dog. Interestingly, however, Jones doesn't name the filmmakers. Because she positions Farrah Fawcett so centrally in the analysis—including Fawcett's interviews and comments on feminism, survivors of domestic violence, and the film itself—one may be tempted to compare Fawcett unfavorably with Treadwell.

But Fawcett was not ultimately responsible for *The Burning Bed*. Rose Leiman Goldenberg adapted Faith McNulty's biography *The Burning Bed: The True Story of an Abused Wife* and Robert Greenwald directed. Given Greenwald's earlier films—*Sharon: Portrait of a Mistress* and *Katie: Portrait of a Centerfold*—it is not surprising that *The Burning Bed* (arguably, a portrait of a battered woman) exhibited sensationalist visual techniques. Yet, Jones criticizes the representation of Hughes largely based on how Fawcett “looks,” as an iconic beauty with a lack of feminist consciousness. By blaming Fawcett for the film's troubling constructions, Jones ignores the actual creators of the representation.

Jones's argument is strongest when she reads the courtroom performances theatrically, marking the similarities between the legal performances of (mostly male) defense attorneys who represent the accused, and the dramatic creations of male play-

wrights. In both instances, a male interpreter carefully constructs the woman's voice to confirm existing social beliefs. But Jones is less adept discussing television. Unlike the stage or the courtroom, television is dependent on layers of technical apparatus to create its reality. Jones might have better distinguished televised performances from those in the theatre. Implicitly, the book expresses a clear preference for theatre, especially experimental works such as *Machinal*, Sharon Pollock's *Blood Relations*, and Dario Fo and Franca Rame's *Medea*. But Jones never makes explicit her criticism of realism. Still, there is much to glean from her readings of cultural history, and this book could serve as an introduction for students interested in cultural history and popular entertainment.

Such readings would be enhanced with a fuller framework for the reading of televised and cinematic images. Certainly, the parallels between theatre as popular entertainment and contemporary television are worth considering. But for cultural history to be read through the lens of popular entertainment, the apparatus of media must be more rigorously considered. Recent media studies in film and television offer valuable insights into the constructions of character on screen, and would have been useful here. Examining the roles of the camera, the close-up, and the cut in creating and controlling images of women on screen might explain why women who murder are not only Medea's daughters, but also the media's darlings.

SARAH BAY-CHENG  
Colgate University

**THE THEATRE OF MARINA CARR: “BEFORE RULES WAS MADE.”** Edited by Cathy Leeney and Anna McMullan. Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2003; pp. 270. \$28.95 paper.

As recently as 1993 a well-known theatre director in Dublin remarked, “There are no Irish women playwrights,” responding to an audience member's question as to why there were so few women playwrights produced at Ireland's theatres. The validity of that claim was challenged the same year, with Glasshouse Productions commissioning two seasons of extracts from women's plays, and *Theatre Ireland* devoting a special issue to the position of women within Irish theatre. Ironically, *Theatre Ireland* folded after the women in theatre issue and no work by a woman dramatist was premiered on the Abbey Theatre main stage for another five years, until Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats* . . . in