

**“Die wilde Frau”: Colonialism in Christa Wolf’s  
*Medea. Stimmen***

**Brangwen Stone**

This article focuses on Christa Wolf’s 1996 novel *Medea. Stimmen*. It explores how Wolf uses the motif of colonialism to refigure the ancient myth of Medea into a narrative that highlights gendered colonial discourse and oppression, also canvassing to what extent the novel can be read as an allegory of post-reunification Germany.

**Keywords:** Christa Wolf; colonialism; *Wendeliteratur*; Medea; GDR

Across the accumulation of the history of the West there  
are those people who speak the encrypted discourse of the  
melancholic and the migrant.  
(Bhabha, *Location* 236)

Medea, the “barbarian” princess from Colchis, is infamous as the sorceress who murdered her children in vengeance on her unfaithful husband. The myth of Medea first appeared in written form in Hesiod’s *Theogony* around 700 BC, but the best-known literary version is Euripides’ eponymous tragedy first produced in 431 BC. Euripides’ play has since been the source for countless adaptations, ranging from Seneca’s tragedy *Medea*, Jean Anouilh’s 1946 play *Medée*, and Luigi Cherubini’s 1797 opera *Medée*. In Christa Wolf’s 1996 post-reunification novel *Medea. Stimmen*, infanticide and wild passion, central to most

versions of the ancient myth, make way for an emphasis on colonial aspects of the myth that can be read as an allegory for the treatment of East Germans in the aftermath of the fall of the wall. Writing at a time when most former colonies had become independent, Wolf is not critiquing colonialism per se. Instead for Wolf colonialism was emblematic of the belief in cultural superiority that still informs interactions between different cultural groups in the present day. In this she agrees with Edward Said, who argues that, “[t]hrough for the most part the colonies have won their independence, many of the imperial attitudes underlying colonial conquest continue” (Said 16-7). Quoting Jules Harmand, a French advocate of colonialism, Said argues that the colonialist belief in the innate superiority of the white race and of Western civilization over other races and civilizations can still be seen in the present day in “polemics about the superiority of Western civilization over others, the supreme value of purely Western humanities [. . .] the essential inferiority and threat of the non-Westerner [. . .], and critics of ‘native’ regression in Africa and Asia” (Said 17).

Wolf is often named as the most internationally successful writer to have emerged from the former GDR, yet her legacy was muddied by post-reunification controversies. These began with the 1990 publication of the autobiographical novella *Was bleibt*, which focused on the Stasi’s constant surveillance of the narrator and was interpreted as an attempt of an author who had been a privileged intellectual in the GDR, while often being seen as a dissident on the international stage, to be seen as a victim of the state. This perception intensified when it came to light in 1993 that Wolf had operated as an unofficial informant for the Stasi from 1959 to 1962.

Though Wolf immediately published her Stasi files, her credibility and standing as a writer never fully recovered. *Was bleibt* was published post-reunification, but it had already been written in 1979, and thus *Medea. Stimmen*, which she began working on around 90/91 was the first novel Wolf wrote post-reunification. Wolf's *Medea* adaptation followed her earlier adaptation of Greek myth in the novel *Kassandra*, published in 1983, in which the critical depiction of Trojan patriarchal society slipping into totalitarianism was read as an allegory for the GDR, while Cassandra's call for peace between Greece and Troy was seen as a reaction to the danger of the nuclear arms race, which was at its height at the time of publication.<sup>1</sup>

In *Medea. Stimmen* six different characters narrate the story, each narration forming a chapter of the novel. The narrators are: Medea; Jason; Agameda, a Colchian former pupil of Medea; Akamas, the Corinthian First astronomer of King Creon; Leukon, the Corinthian Second Astronomer of the King; and Glauke the daughter of Creon. Medea comes to voice four times, Jason and Leukon narrate two chapters, and the remaining narrators only speak once. However, although the narrative is polyvocal, the novel essentially conveys one "true" version of events. It is made clear that Medea's detractors are either deluded or using Medea for their own base purposes. Inge Stephan thus suggests somewhat scathingly, "es ist, als ob der Text sich nicht entscheiden könnte, auf wen er hören will: auf die vielen verwirrenden Stimmen der Vergangenheit und Gegenwart oder auf die eine belehrende Stimme der Autorin, die hinter den

---

<sup>1</sup> This allegory was also clear to GDR censors, and thus some passages were removed from the GDR edition of the text (indicated by ellipses) but retained for the West German edition.

Stimmen ihrer Protagonisten immer hörbar bleibt" (249). The anonymous narrator's introduction to the voices ends with "[d]ie wilde Frau. Jetzt hören wir Stimmen" (Wolf, *Medea* 10), thus the interrogation of the construction of Otherness is clear from the beginning. As Sabine Wilke notes, despite being reconstructed by Wolf, Medea remains "die wilde Frau" – the savage or barbarian woman – "denn Medea ist nur denkbar als Konstruktion des Orientalistischen Diskurses" (17).

In Marxist theory "colonialism, the conquest and direct control of other people's land, is a particular phase in the history of imperialism, which is now best understood as the globalization of the capitalist mode of production, its penetration of previously non-capitalist regions of the world, and destruction of pre- or non-capitalist forms of social organization" (Williams 3). Although Wolf's critique of colonialism is undoubtedly a criticism of late capitalism, gender is also inextricably linked to colonialism in her novel. She thus seems to reference the conception of the Orientalized Other as "feminine", and draw parallels between the subordination of women and the subordination of those who are racially or culturally other. Wolf believes that myth represents the shift from matriarchal to patriarchal society (Steksal 314-5), evoking Friedrich Engels' belief that Greek myth represents the move from a classless, matrilineal society to a stratified patrilineal society (Emmerich 140). The author argues moreover that Greek tragedies are "Zusammenfassungen, vorläufige Endprodukte ungeheuerster jahrhundertlanger Kämpfe", in which the morals of the victors are formulated, but "hinter der Fabel, die sie diktieren, die Bedrohung durch Älteres, Wildes, Ungezügeltes durchschimmert" (cited by Emmerich 140). Ascribing political significance to myth, Wolf seeks to reinterpret it

from the perspective of the victims rather than the victors of history. Like Heiner Müller before her, Wolf also implies a critique of the embroilment of Enlightenment rationalism in colonialism in her Medea text, thus evoking Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. Wolf's interrogation of the distinctions made between "enlightened" Corinthian thought and "mythical" Colchian ways also suggests like Adorno and Horkheimer that "[m]yth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology" (Adorno & Horkheimer xviii).

The critical emphasis on colonization and colonial discourse found in Wolf's version of the Medea myth is not entirely new. Already Euripides had underscored that Medea, a woman *and* a foreigner, is doubly marginalized in Corinth. Later Hans Henny Jahn underlined Medea's status as racially and culturally other in his *Medea*, which was first performed at the Staatliches Schauspielhaus in Berlin in 1926, explicitly making Medea Black and Jason Greek. He identified racism as a fundamental contemporary problem writing, "[e]iner der schamlosesten Gebräuche des europäischen Menschen ist die Nichtachtung vor den einzelnen Vertretern nicht weißhäutiger Rassen" (Henny Jahn 956). Heiner Müller's Medea texts, the most prominent Medea adaptations in GDR literature, also emphasized colonialism. Müller incorporated the myth of Medea into a variety of plays, the best known of which is the fragmentary play *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*, published in 1983 and premiered at the Schauspielhaus Bochum in the same year. He had worked on this tripartite play over many years, writing *Verkommenes Ufer* in 1949 and *Medeamaterial* in 1968 (Ullrich 878). Two other Medea texts in which Medea features as an anti-

patriarchal vengeance-seeking woman, *Medeakommentar* (part of the play *Zement*), *Medeaspiel*, were performed earlier (in 1972 and 1974 respectively). Müller argued that the story of Jason is the earliest myth of colonization – at least in the Greek context – and that the ending of the myth “bezeichnet die Schwelle, den Übergang vom Mythos zur Geschichte: Jason wird von seinem eigenen Schiff erschlagen” (Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer* 130). He locates the figure of Medea at the beginning of colonization and (European) history, and suggests the fact that the colonizer is killed by the vehicle of colonization points to their end. He also argues that the Medea myth represents the “Übergang von der clanorientierten Gesellschaft zur Klassengesellschaft [. . .] von der Familie zum Staat zur Polis” (Müller, *Gesammelte Irrtümer* 168). Drawing on Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Uta Staiger argues that, “Müller enlarges Medea’s social exclusion, and through the rough structure of myth, aims to draw out the archaeology of history at large as based on the dominance of reason, and the futile patterns of conflict” (Staiger 164-5).

In Wolf, as in Müller’s text, Medea is a figure living at the intersection of two different times. Having grown up in the predominantly matriarchal society of Colchis (though it has since shifted to patriarchal rule), she follows Jason to patriarchal Corinth. She leaves Colchis because she cannot bear to live under the reign of her despotic father anymore after the failure of a revolution she was part of, and the concomitant murder of her brother, not because she is madly in love with Jason. She remains a foreigner in Corinth as she refuses to conform to the Corinthian social norm. Eventually she is expelled and leaves her children in a temple, where they are killed by a

crowd who have been whipped into a frenzy of xenophobia by the state, anxious to preserve its dwindling power. Thus the murder of the children, which figures as the ultimate (albeit futile) refusal to conform to patriarchal social norms in Müller's Medea texts, becomes a sign of the state's reassertion of patriarchal power in Wolf's version. This revision of the myth has a basis in versions of the Medea story prior to Euripides but, even before Wolf discovered this, it was clear to her, "dass sie bei mir keine Kindsmörderin sein könnte – nie hätte eine noch von matriarchalen Werten beeinflusste Frau ihre Kinder umgebracht" (cited at Hochgeschurz 51). Sven Merkel argues that rendering Medea innocent of infanticide means that "Medea/die Frau" becomes a metaphor "eines weiblichen Anderen gegenüber der westlich-patriarchalischen Zivilisation", yet as will be discussed later the binaries in Wolf's *Medea* are not as straightforward as they initially seem (Merkel 219).

It should be noted that though Wolf was an ardent critic of patriarchy, and was celebrated as a feminist author in the United States and elsewhere in the English-speaking world – indeed the line "the difficulty of saying I" from *Christa T* was even taken up as a slogan by American feminists – she did not see herself as a feminist. In an essay first published in 1978, Wolf expresses her admiration of the solidarity, spontaneity and creativity of Western feminist movements, but adds that she does not believe that "sect-like" movements exclusively focused on women, which result from the lack of strong workers' movements in the West in her opinion, can solve problems facing society as a whole (Wolf, *Werke* 122-5). For Wolf, the lingering problems with women's position in GDR society at the time, despite the progress made under socialism, show the enduring damage that patriarchal class society

has inflicted on its objects and that it will take a long time for them—both male and female—to become subjects (Wolf, *Werke* 122).

Medea and her fellow Colchians are not the first foreigners to set shore in Corinth in Wolf's novel. The land the city-state of Corinth is situated on was obtained through colonial invasion, and its original inhabitants dwell on the edges of Corinthian society. Medea's former student Agamedea states that the Corinthians are subconsciously aware that: "sie diesen Landstrich von den Ureinwohnern, die sie verachten, einst mit roher Gewalt erobert haben'" (Wolf, *Medea* 86-87). The Corinthians believe they are superior to the native inhabitants: "[s]ie werden ja mit der unerschütterlichen Überzeugung geboren, dass sie den kleinwüchsigen braunhäutigen Menschen überlegen sind" (78). The Corinthians treat the colonized natives and the migrant Colchians in the same belittling manner, showing their hate towards them "ohne Gewissensbisse und ohne Einschränkungen" (*M* 87). Wolf thus implicitly compares the treatment of immigrants and refugees with the treatment of colonized peoples. Müller also explicitly makes this connection when he compares Medea's experience as a foreigner in Corinth with the experience of the modern Gastarbeiter:

Immerhin stellt er [Euripides] die Gastarbeiterfrage: Medea, die Barbarin, wenn auch aus Sicht der Sklavenhalter. Unsere Asylgesetzgebung, die unter anderem die Trennung von Müttern und Kindern, die Sprengung von Familienverbänden, ermöglicht, basiert ja auf den Mustern der Sklavenhaltergesellschaft, die bei Euripides nachzulesen sind (Müller, *Krieg ohne Schlacht* 320).



At first it appears as though there is a set of straightforward dichotomies in Wolf's *Medea. Stimmen* – man/woman, Corinth/Colchis, West/East – that correlate to bad/good, but gradually many of these distinctions are undermined. The slaughter of Medea's brother Absyrtos, put on the throne in an attempt at revolution supported by Medea, by a group of old women, "deren Lebenssinn es war durchzusetzen, daß wir in Kolchis in jeder winzigen Einzelheit so leben sollten wie unsere Vorfahren" (102), is just as terrible as the murder of Princess Iphinoe by the Corinthian King and his followers in an attempt to preserve his power. Both kings' have clung to power by murdering one of their children, and the ideal matriarchal Colchis of yore is changing to a society in which the same patriarchal defects can be found as in Corinth. Yixu Lü suggests that the "portrayal of two societies whose power-structures are based on the irrationality of the sacrifices of Apsyrtos and Iphinoe for political motives, which must be disguised within the various modes of each state's self-representation, is a direct application of ideas from the *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*" (Lü 13).

Jason's approach to Medea has all the trappings of the colonizer's stance towards the colonized subject. He is horrified by the culture of the Colchians and, like Akamas and the general Corinthian population, believes that his culture is infinitely superior to Colchian culture. This belief is reminiscent of colonialism, but also seems to allude to West German attitudes to East Germans in post-reunification Germany. As a number of reviews of the novel immediately identified, the situation of Medea and the other Colchians in Corinth in the novel can be read as an allegory for the situation of East Germans in post-

reunification Germany.<sup>2</sup> Gender and colonialism were also motifs in other literary takes on German reunification (see for instance Monika Maron's *Animal Triste*). The metaphor of gender was partly derived from discourse regarding reunification in the media, which portrayed the joining of East and West as a wedding, in which the West was (of course) the bridegroom and the East the blushing bride. Colonization was invoked because very few remnants of the East German political structure or of East German culture survived reunification.<sup>3</sup> In Wolf's version of this allegory, Corinth stands in for the FRG, and Colchis for the GDR. The cultural variances between Corinth and Colchis in the novel also seem to reflect a number of perceived social differences between the FRG and the former GDR: in Corinth the worth of a person is measured according to how much gold they possess (38), women are not allowed to speak until addressed by men (79), whereas

---

<sup>2</sup> The review in the influential weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* claimed, however, that in this allegory matriarchal Colchis/ the GDR is portrayed as morally superior to patriarchal Corinth/ West Germany (Hochgeschurz 11). Such a clear moral distinction between Corinth and Colchis is not borne out by the novel, which clearly outlines the moral failings of Colchis too, as noted previously.

<sup>3</sup> Colonization more generally (rather than gendered colonialism) was a fairly common metaphor for reunification, as some interpreted it as an example of neocolonialism. On this see for instance the essay collection *Kolonialisierung der DDR* edited by Wolfgang Dümke and Fritz Vilmar and Paul Cooke's monograph *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia* for a discussion of the metaphor of the colonization of the GDR more generally; and Andrea Geier's chapter "Enteignete Neger und ausgebeutete Indianer: Der Kolonialisierungs-Diskurs in der Literatur nach 1990" and John Pizer's article "Imagining Resistance to the 'Colonization' of East Germany by West Germany in Novels by Günter Grass, Christa Wolf, and Volker Braun" regarding reunification colonization metaphors in literary works.

in Colchis there is gender equity and equal distribution of property (99-100). But although Colchis is painted as a more enlightened and equitable society than Corinth, Wolf also alludes to the gradual failure of the socialist dream in the GDR in her depiction of Colchis. If the novel is read as a fable of post-reunification Germany, the discrimination and racist violence faced by Medea and other Colchians and the Indigenous inhabitants of Corinth can also be interpreted as reflecting a response to the rise in attacks on those asylum seekers who could readily be identified as non-German in the years immediately following the *Wende*, particularly in the former GDR. At the time Wolf was writing her novel there were a number of high profile violent xenophobic incidents, including riots in Rostock in August 1992, and a Neo-Nazi arson attack on a Turkish family in Solingen resulting in the death of five people in 1993. In an interview about the novel with Petra Kamann, Wolf expressed her identification with asylum seekers, and also noted that she had come to the realization that Germans always marginalized certain people and made them scapegoats in times of crisis (Hochgeschurz 49-50). An allusion to xenophobia in post-reunification Germany seems to be supported by Wolf's contrast of the physical appearance of the fair-skinned Corinthians with that of the Colchians', who have a darker complexion and curlier hair, and the Indigenous inhabitants, described as "kleinwüchsige [. . .] dunkelhäutige [. . .] Menschen" (Wolf 78). Lü disagrees that the novel is intended to reflect "shortcomings of society in the united Germany", arguing that it instead "revisits issues first raised by Horkheimer and Adorno in the wake of the defeat of Nazism in terms that relate to contemporary European society" (14). Yet I would argue that these intentions are not mutually exclusive, and that the novel alludes to issues specific to

post-German post-reunification society – some of which I have outlined above – but also contains a critique of trends in contemporary Western society more generally.

Jason's attitude towards Medea and her culture fit within Said's framework of Orientalist discourse. According to Said, Orientalism establishes a set of polarities in which the Orient is characterized as irrational, exotic, erotic, despotic and heathen, while the West is set up in opposition as rational, familiar, moral, fair and Christian. This conception is clear in descriptions of Medea as "halb gefürchtete, halb verachtete Barbarin" (113), "schöne Wilde" (19), a foreigner (195) who will always remain foreign to Corinth (140), and "unheimlich" (123). Said argues moreover that the East is regarded as "passive, seminal, *feminine*, even silent and supine" (Said 138, emphasis added), and that the sexual subjection of Oriental women to Western men "fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West and the discourse about the Orient it enabled" (Said 6).<sup>4</sup> Jason's Orientalist approach is readily apparent in his account of his first encounter with Medea and her culture. His reaction to the Colchian practice of hanging dead men in the trees until their bones are picked free of flesh are characterized, as Wilke notes, by the horror that marks the encounter of the "civilized" human with the "primitive" human (17). Jason is horrified by the "Totenfrüchte" hanging in the trees, as this practice stands in stark contrast to the Greek custom of ensuring that bodies are

---

<sup>4</sup> Scholars have since argued that Said did not devote enough attention to the role of gender in imperialism. Anne McClintock, for instance recognizes "the importance and influence of Said's work on male imperial relations", but regrets "that he does not systematically explore the dynamics of gender as a critical aspect of the imperial project" (McClintock 14).

interred unharmed (Wolf, *Medea* 63). He is convinced that his culture's way of burying corpses is the only right way: "ich war sicher und bin es bis heute, daß es nur eine richtige Art gibt, seine Toten zu ehren, und viele falsche" (63-4).

In respect to Medea, Jason's horror at the archaic is tinged with sexual desire, thus further according to Said's model of Orientalism. Seeing Medea slaughter a sacrificial animal, in her priestess' garb of fur and a Phrygian cap made of steer's testicles, he perceives her as "schrecklich und schön" and he desires her as he has never desired any other woman before (65). As Wilke notes, the description of Medea's sacrificial slaughter of a young steer cites Sacher-Masoch's *Venus im Pelz* (18). Moreover, there is a clear Freudian castration threat emanating from the woman wearing a phallic object on her head who wields a knife. The sexual attraction felt towards a woman presenting an imminent threat of violence is also reminiscent of Heinrich von Kleist's play *Penthesilea*, on which Christa Wolf wrote an essay in 1982. Her 1979 novel *Kein Ort. Nirgends*, was based on a fictional meeting between Kleist and Karoline von Günderode.

Once in Corinth, Jason's story of his travels to Colchis is that of the Western explorer encountering the primitive savages. He tells the Corinthians what they want to hear about the "barbaric" Colchians': "die Korinther wollten hören, daß im wilden Osten auch die Tiere unbezwinglich und schauerlich sind, und es schaudert sie, wenn man ihnen sagt, dass die Kolcher Schlangen als Hausgötter an ihrer Herdstelle hielten und sie mit Milch und Honig fütterten" (56). Agamedea, Medea's former pupil who betrays her because she feels betrayed by her, is happy to recognize Corinthian life as "[eine] höhere Existenzform", and to adapt herself to the stereotype of the primitive

migrant, wandering around the Corinthians' houses wide-eyed, and telling them of the "primitiven Behausungen [. . .] in denen die meisten Leute in Kolchis lebten", in order to secure the clothes and food she desires (75). Medea, on the other hand, refuses to conform to Corinthian social norms, especially regarding gender roles, refusing to tie back her abundant curly hair (67), or let men speak for her (79).

Jason is unwilling to recognize that the fact that the Corinthians view the Colchians as Other and exotic also means that they view them as inferior, although he himself – as his musings on burial methods evince – is convinced of the superiority of Corinthian cultural practices. He explains to Medea, "man setzt doch die Kolcher nicht herab [. . .], wenn man feststellt, daß sie anders sind" (59). Akamas also condemns the Colchians' cultural practices, but from a standpoint of rationalism rather than with Jason's instinctive revulsion. He regards Medea's belief that thoughts should stem from feelings as "[v]eraltet natürlich, überholt" (123). Medea's "older" Colchian belief system renders her "zu sehr Weib" in his opinion (*M* 123). Read in the context of post-reunification, this disdain towards Colchian practices and beliefs seems to reflect a similar dismissal of GDR practices and beliefs, which were like GDR infrastructure also seen as old and outdated. Nonetheless, the Colchian system of astronomy, "die von Frauen betrieben wird und auf den Mondphasen beruht", has something to offer to Akamas, and Medea is just as able to detect the "Sphärenmusik" as he is (*M* 124).

Learning Corinthian astronomy from Akamas, and adapting to other elements of Corinthian culture, Medea becomes, as Wilke notes, a hybrid figure, consisting of elements of both cultures (Wilke 15). Staiger argues that already in Euripides' play, Medea's "most threatening

capacity turns out to be precisely her command of these discourses [of power and exclusion], her perilous power over the *logos*" (Staiger 162). Absorbing the language of authority, reserved for powerful men in Corinthian culture, Wolf's Medea twists this discourse to suit her needs, a form of colonial mimicry, as described by Bhabha, in which the colonial adopts the behavior and discursive modes of the colonizer, and which teeters "between mimicry and mockery" (Bhabha 123). Inevitably the Corinthian elite feels "threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double" (Bhabha 123).

Caught between two cultures, Wolf's Medea can see the disadvantages of both. She criticizes Corinthian society for its suppression of feelings, its greed for gold and its oppression of women, who are expected to behave like "sorgfältig gezähmte Haustiere" (18). Yet she also denounces her father, "unser[en] hinfällige[n], unfähige[n] König" (102), and the fanatical old Colchian women who killed her brother. Wilke argues that Medea's hybrid status can be observed in her "civilized" horror at the primitive human sacrifice of her brother: "seitdem ist mir ein Schauder geblieben vor diesen alten Zeiten und vor den Kräften die sie in uns freisetzen und derer wir dann nicht mehr Herr werden können" (Wilke 21).

As a hybrid being, Medea's task is, Circe tells her, to live amongst people and attempt to alleviate their fear of themselves that renders them so wild and dangerous (110). She tries to share her Colchian culture with the Corinthians, saving them from starvation during a terrible drought, by educating them about edible wild plants and forcing them to eat horses, which are seen as untouchable in Corinthian culture (49). Yet although she rescues the Corinthians from a severe famine, she is labeled a witch because she has brought the Corinthians to break a taboo.

Later she warns to no avail that the plague will spread if the dead victims of the earthquake are left to rot in the ruins of their houses (180), and when the plague does spread she is accused of spreading it (181). The Corinthians in their xenophobia, and fear of disaster, are very receptive to Akamas' efforts to first stigmatize and then scapegoat Medea.

Although aware of the Corinthian population's increasing hatred towards her, Medea proudly defies warnings that it would be best not to go to the spring feast. She attempts to prevent the raging masses from killing a group of prisoners seeking asylum in the temple, but just succeeds in convincing them to kill only one of them. This section of the novel (in addition to the earthquake mentioned earlier) echoes Kleist's novella *Das Erdbeben in Chili* in which an unmarried couple who have been condemned for adultery in a case that has attracted much public attention, escape imprisonment (and in the case of the mother imminent execution) as a result of a massive earthquake that kills many people.<sup>5</sup> Yet after a brief idyll, they (and a baby misidentified as theirs) are murdered in a church by an angry lynch mob, which blames the earthquake on their adultery. The murder in the temple leads Medea to once again feel the shudder of the civilized at the cultural practices of the primitive. Later, the scene of mass hysteria, fueled by an eclipse that Akamas knew would occur but deliberately kept secret in order to terrify the people, is repeated at the Feast of Demeter celebrated by the Colchian women; this time after a man, who has come to chop down a tree in the Colchian holy grove in a deliberate act of sacrilege, is

---

<sup>5</sup> Thank you to the anonymous reviewer who pointed this allusion out. As noted above, Kleist was a clear influence on Wolf.



castrated. Medea is falsely accused of being the ringleader of the women who cut off the man's genitalia. She is banned from Corinth and flees to the mountains. But even once the banishment has been pronounced her ordeal is not over yet: before she leaves Jason rapes her, and once in exile her children are stoned to death. In the aftermath, the guilt for the murder of the children is attributed to Medea, and then is remembered in an annual ritual, which becomes the basis for the myth that Medea killed her own children. As Lü notes, "[i]n the terms of Horkheimer and Adorno, a myth within the context of instrumentalised reason is, by definition, opaque – a construct beneath whose surface those who accept it do not probe, because to do so would reveal the cracks in the edifice of reason itself" (Lü 14).

The clash between the Colchians and the Corinthians in the novel also evokes Freud's theory of the "narcissism of minor differences", which Bhabha mentions in reference to the discourse of nation and migration (Bhabha, *Location* 213-4). Freud argues that, "it is always possible to bind together a considerable number of people in love, so long as there are other people left to receive the manifestations of their aggressiveness" (Freud 114). This is evident when a feeling of Corinthian national unity is achieved – after a period fraught with natural disaster and inadequate government response – by excluding the foreign Medea, killing her children, and creating a new ritual and myth based on the lie that Medea killed her own children. Bhabha argues that "the paranoid threat from the hybrid is finally uncontainable because it breaks down the symmetry and duality of self/Other".' (Bhabha, "Signs" 158). The Corinthian elite contains the threat to its power in the only manner it deems possible – by eliminating the hybrid. Corinthian society is not open to other cultures:

Colchians or Indigenous inhabitants must either, like Agamedea, assimilate to the dominant society, or live a quiet life on the periphery of the city and of society, like Oistros and Aretha.

In Wolf's *Medea* text the motif of colonialism is used to refigure the myth of Medea, transforming it from a tale of a passionate archaic woman who is betrayed by her lover and seeks vengeance, to a story highlighting gendered colonial discourse and oppression. Medea represents the hybrid subject unable to fit neatly into binaries such as Colchis/Corinth, female/male, and affective/rational. If the novel is interpreted as an allegory of reunification Germany, which many elements of the narrative certainly lend themselves to, then it reads as an indictment of xenophobia and the treatment of East Germans in post-reunification Germany. It also suggests condemnation of the tendency for most aspects of GDR life including practices, policies, and infrastructures that were viewed positively by its citizens not to be carried over into reunified Germany. Yet the fable clearly also indicates that the GDR was flawed, and its disdain for the nostalgia of Colchian refugees for a Colchis that never really existed suggests a rebuke for *Ostalgie*. The novel infers, moreover, that the colonialism and patriarchal structures found in the ancient Greek myth linger on in the present, thus critiquing contemporary Western society.

## Works Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London & New York: Routledge Classics, 1994.
- . "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree Outside Delhi, May 1817." *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 144-165.
- Cooke, Paul. *Representing East Germany since Unification: From Colonization to Nostalgia*. Oxford: Berg, 2005.
- Dümcke, Wolfgang & Fritz Vilmar (eds). *Kolonialisierung der DDR: Kritische Analysen und Alternativen des Einigungsprozesses*. Münster: agenda Verlag, 1996.
- Emmerich, Wolfgang. "Der vernünftige, der schreckliche Mythos: Heiner Müller's Umgang mit der griechischen Mythologie." *Heiner Müller Material: Texte und Kommentare*. Ed. Frank Hörnigk. Leipzig: Reclam-Verlag, 1990. 138-156.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and its Discontents*. Trans. Joan Riviere. London: The Hogarth Press, 1961.
- Geier, Andrea. "Enteignete Indianer und ausgebeutete Neger: Der Kolonialisierungs-Diskurs in der Literatur nach 1990." *NachBilder der Wende*. Ed. Inge Stephan and Alexander Tacke. Köln: Böhlau, 2008. 70-83.
- Hochgeschurz, Marianne. *Christa Wolfs Medea: Voraussetzungen zu einem Text*. Berlin: Gerhard Wolf Janus Press, 1998.
- Horkheimer, Max & Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002.
- Merkel, Sven. "Im Banne Medeas. Überlegungen zu einem Motiv im Ausblick auf zwei Texte: Heiner Müller *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten* und Christa Wolf *Medea*. *Stimmen*."

- ZeitStimmen: Betrachtungen zur Wende-Literatur*. Ed. Hannelore Scholz et al. Berlin: trafo verlag, 2000. 205-224.
- Müller, Heiner. *Gesammelte Irrtümer. Interviews und Gespräche*. Frankfurt a. M.: Verlag der Autoren, 1986.
- . *Krieg ohne Schlacht. Leben in zwei Diktaturen*. Köln: Kiepenhauer und Witsch, 1994.
- . *Verkommenes Ufer Medeamaterial Landschaft mit Argonauten*. In *Herzstück*. Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1983.
- Lü, Yixu. „Germany: Myth and Apologia in Christa Wolf’s Novel Medea. Voices.“ *Portal* 1.1 (2004): 1-19.
- Pizer, John. “Imagining Resistance to the ‘Colonization’ of East Germany by West Germany in Novels by Günter Grass, Christa Wolf, and Volker Braun.” *Colloquia Germanica* 50.2 (2017): 205-227.
- Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.
- Staiger, Uta. “Beyond the Body Politic: Reconsidering Body and the State in Heiner Müller’s Version of Medea.” *Performance and Performativity in German Cultural Studies*. Ed. Caroline Duttlinger, Lucia Ruprecht and Andrew Webber. Oxford & New York: Peter Lang, 2003. 159-176.
- Steksal, Christoph. *Medea und Jason in der deutschen Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts: Aktualisierungspotential eines Mythos*. Regensburg: S. Roderer Verlag, 2001.
- Stephan, Inge. *Musen & Medusen: Mythos und Geschlecht in der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*. Köln: Böhlau, 1997.
- Ullrich, Renate. “Die Macht der Frauen. Oder: Warum Medea ihre Kinder tötete” *UTOPIEKreativ: Diskussion sozialistischer Alternativen* 216 (2008): 869-882.
- Williams, Patrick & Laura Chrisman. “Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: An Introduction.” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*. Ed. Patrick Williams

- & Laura Chrisman. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994. 1-20.
- Wilke, Sabine. "Die Konstruktion der wilden Frau: Christa Wolfs Roman *Medea*. *Stimmen* als postkolonialer Text." *The German Quarterly* 76.1 (2003): 11-24.
- Wolf, Christa. *Medea. Stimmen*. Frankfurt: Luchterhand, 1996.
- Christa Wolf, *Werke*. Ed. Sonja Hilzinger, 12 vols., vol. 8. München: Luchterhand, 2000.