NINA WEIBULL

Notes on a shadowed gaze

Delacroix's *Medea* of 1838

IN 2018, AT THE *Delacroix (1798–1863)* exhibition arranged by the Louvre in collaboration with the Metropolitan Museum of Art, all the "grandes machines" by which the painter once established his fame were brought together. Halfway into the labyrinth of halls and passages built to display the extraordinarily comprehensive show, a rarely displayed painting of monumental scale (215 × 280 cm), *Saint Sebastian Tended by the Holy Women* (1836, fig. 2), remarkable for its compositional balance and luminous colour, was flanked by the figure of *Medea*, powerfully dominating her narrow picture space. The paintings are near-contemporary, and their pictorial interconnection is obvious. Female figures dominate, mirroring each other in posture, both directing their action towards male opponents, to care for or to kill. As with *Saint Sebastian*, *Medea About to Kill Her Children* (1838, fig. 1) is also remarkably large, but of a vertical format (260 × 165 cm).[1] Paintings of this size and format tend to represent moments of singular importance, such as the Crucifixion and the Ascension of Christ, or of the Madonna. The vertical axis serves to support a performance of existential or mystical transformation. The allegorical *Greece on the Ruins of Missolonghi* (1826, 209 × 147 cm) preceeded *Medea* by just over a decade, but would constitute a formal parallel to it although celebrating a most grievous state of heroic defeat.

When *Medea* was originally shown in 1838 at the Salon, the official art exhibition of the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris, the painting received enthusiastic praise. However, a certain detail caught the critics'

Figure 1. *Medea About to Kill Her Children*, 1838, oil on canvas, 260 × 165 cm, Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts, inv. no. 542. RMN-Grand Palais.

1. The title of the painting when shown in 1838 was *Furious Medea*. "She is pursued and on the point of killing both her children" (*Médée furieuse*. "Elle est poursuivie et sur le point de tuer ses deux enfans [sic]", *Livret du Salon de 1838*, no. 456, Sérullaz 1963, p. 184). In 1864 it was bought by the French state for the museum in Lille and given the title *Médée s'apprêtant à assassiner ses enfants*. In 2018 the painting was accordingly presented as *Médée furieuse* in Paris and as *Medea About to Kill Her Children (Médée furieuse)* in New York.

Figure 2. *Saint Sebastian Tended by the Holy Women*, 1836, oil on canvas, 215 × 280 cm, Nantua, Département de l'Ain, Collection du Centre national des arts plastiques, inv. FNAC PFH-5176.

attention and caused objections to the near-horizontal shading of her eye. The effect of a shadowed eye is in fact prefigured in Delacroix's *Saint Sebastian Tended by the Holy Women*, where the woman bringing unction in an amphora turns her face as if to observe a company moving down in the valley. The shadow vertically veiling her profile is a reversal of the half-illuminated face of Irene, who kneels by the side of the saint; it is an alluring effect of the oblique light originating from a source to the left beyond the borders of the image.

Of interest to the critics of 1838, and to me, is the detail of *Medea's* shaded eye as the artist decided to paint it, thereby seemingly granting it a specific signification. Is this sharply delineated shadow, appearing within the intriguing play of light and darkness which characterizes the painting, to be seen as a strictly optical effect, or should it rather be understood as a metaphor? If shown to function metaphorically, what does it signify? Is it an instance within an iconographic tradition, or does it rather serve as a unique key to Delacroix's contemplation of Medea's myth and tragedy?

This chapter investigates the primary models, the ensuing work of sketches and the final representation of Delacroix's *Medea*. I will consider the historic moment of attracting the critics' attention at the Salon of 1838, and further scrutinize the painting's affective and intellectual effects on a female academic beholder of the 2020s. Questions to be raised are: By what visual means does *Medea* continue to bring its specific charge to the beholder; what does it make me see?[2] What range of visualized qualities did Delacroix's *Medea* communicate to the group of male critics at the Salon, versed in the classical tradition and who stated their impressions in accord with the spirit of the age? What elements in Euripides' tragedy of 431 BC are contained in Delacroix's painting, whether appealing to the critics of 1838 or, alternatively, going unrecognized? I will finally address the concepts of the "sublime" and the "beautiful", as expounded within an exploration of aesthetics by Edmund Burke in the 1750s, aiming to explore their relevance as keys to capture and clarify the quality of disturbing ambiguity which marks the painting, apparent to the critics of 1838 as well as to me as a present-day spectator.[3]

My dialogue with the painting's visual implications aims at clarifying the sense of a paradox or an enigma which seems to be embodied in the final version of *Medea* and partly played out by the element of shadows. Whereas Medea's shifting grasp of her children is in clear focus in the sketches on paper, the full effect of shadows only comes into play in the final painting. Shadows may be referred to as "holes in the light". On the last page of a study that is strictly dedicated to the intriguing optical play of light and shadows, Michael Baxandall resorts to the term "uncanny" to indicate the emotive form which a mimetic and mobile shadow (*ombre*) may take in an extended and ontologically more evasive sense, well known to and applied by men of the French Enlightenment: ghostly, secret, threatening.[4] His final reference to this concept, in a Freudian reading charged with ambiguity, will accompany my endeavour to grasp the nature of Medea's shaded gaze. Also present in my mind, while working on this paper, is Baxandall's reminder with reference to ekphrastic texts: "What one offers in a description is a

2. My method of analysis gives priority to the affective commitment involved in artistic creativity and in interpretation serving as a way of scientific knowledge; see also the chapter by Mårten Snickare in this volume.

3. Burke 1757, 1759. For Delacroix's knowledge of the idea of the sublime, see Mras 1966, p. 24–25.

4. Baxandall 1995, p. 144.

representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture."[5]

Primary models for Delacroix's interpretation of Medea

The theme of Medea—a mythological subject treated in visual, literary and dramatic art since the 6th century BC, first performed in 431 BC at the Dionysia festival in Athens as a tragedy by Euripides, holding a high and persisting ambiguity—seems to be absent in French painting of the 19th century both before and after Delacroix.[6] The tragedy would have been known to Delacroix and his contemporaries mainly through textual versions and in the form of theatrical performances. The core of the drama is the revenge of a woman, aimed at her husband but acted out against her innocent young sons. Regardless of the fulfilment of her deed, Medea's story appears to have been an appreciated and widely spread subject in the Antique period.[7]

In a representation of *Medea* of around 50 BC, attributed to the painter Timomachus, the protagonist is said to have been shown with sword in hand, agonizing over the impending killing of her children.[8] Timomachus figures in G.E. Lessing's seminal 1766 essay *Laokoon, oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie*. Lessing celebrates Timomachus for having represented Medea, not "at the moment when she was actually murdering her children, but a few moments before, when a mother's love was still struggling with her vengefulness". Lessing praises the artist's wise decision not to paint Medea at the height of her rage, "thus endowing her brief instant of madness with a permanence that is an affront

5. Baxandall 1985, p. 7.

6. Johnson 1986, p. 80. Paul Lemoyne exhibited a marble group of the subject at the Salon of 1837 (Hargrove 1990, p. 165). A picture of *Medea and Jason*, promised by Titian to Philip II of Spain in 1554 as a pendant for *Perseus and Andromeda*, was never delivered, nor further mentioned (Puttfarken 2003, pp. 19, 24). A pen and ink study by Rubens of "a muscular and emotionally overwrought woman carrying lifeless children on an otherwise bare sheet of white lead paper", datable to *c.* 1600, is a rare representation of the subject preceding Delacroix's painting (Lusbeck 2017, ch. 3). A pen, ink and wash drawing on paper by Nicolas Poussin showing Medea killing her children, *c.* 1649–1650, is in the Royal Collection Trust. Two paintings by Carle van Loo, dated 1759 and 1760, show Medea punishing and taking leave of Jason.

7. Claus & Johnston 1997.

8. Pliny the Elder mentions Timomachus of Byzantium, who "in the time of the Dictator Caesar, painted an Ajax and a Medea [both representing a state of rage] which were placed by Caesar in the Temple of Venus Genetrix" (*Naturalis Historia*, book 35, ch. 40). The subject of Medea contemplating infanticide is known in several Campanian paintings (Ling 1991, pp. 134–135).

to all nature".[9] As a jotting by Delacroix in a notebook from around 1821 attests, he read Lessing in the Vanderbourg translation of 1802, well known to students at the École des Beaux-Arts.[10]

The setting of "but a few moments before" is shown in a fresco in the Casa dei Dioscuri (House of the Dioscuri) in Pompeii (fig. 3). It corresponds to the hint in Euripides' play that the killing takes place out of sight, inside a house. The interior is marked in angled surfaces which promote a subtle play of light and shadow. Dressed in a chiton Medea grasps the knife, handling it in the same vertical position as in Delacroix's painting. Her head is accentuated by a shadowed pane (suggesting a crammed line of columns) behind her, marking her face as the focus of an intense conflict. The only detail which Delacroix's setting shares with the Pompeian fresco is nonetheless significant: the diagonally cast shadow which partly veils Medea's gaze.

To a beholder familiar with Freudian theory, the contradictions in the scenic arrangement in the fresco may call forth the concept of the "uncanny". Whereas the children play in the apparent safety of their home, which is also the proper place of their mother, Medea stands apart, pondering their death while keeping her blood-stained past and repressed guilt to herself.[11] "Thus, *heimlich* is a word, the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambiguity, until it finally coincides with the opposite, *unheimlich*." [12] In this instance the "uncanny" would perform a turn from the homely safe to the imminently gruesome.

However, the Pompeiian fresco was uncovered only in 1827, a fact which certainly puts Delacroix's knowledge of it in doubt. Still, another fresco representing a solitary and likewise standing Medea, found in Herculaneum in December 1739, was known and accessible in the form of an engraving published in volume 1 of *Le Antichità di Ercolano Esposte* (fig. 4).[13] Medea is seen standing in a space briefly characterized by floor steps and a door panel, the diagonal upper line of which seems to mark

9. Lessing 1984, pp. 20–21.

10. Louvre, no. 1741, f. 43, verso. "Another manuscript of Delacroix records the French title of Lessing's work: '*Laokoon, ou bornes de la peinture et de la poésie*, par Lessing'" (Hannoosh 1995, p. 7, n. 11).

11. Margaret Rustin and Michael Rustin notably stress the subject of repressed guilt and shame, see Rustin & Rustin 2019, p. 43.

12. Freud 1955, p. 347.

13. Engraving by Nicola Vanni and Rocco Pozzi after a drawing by La Vega, in *Le Antichità di Ercolano Esposte* (*The Antiquities of Herculaneum Exposed*) VV.AA. vol. 1, pl. 13, 1757–1787, Naples. This information, for which I am most grateful, was kindly provided by Professor Emerita Anne-Marie Leander Touati.

Figure 3. *Medea*, Casa dei Dioscuri, Pompeii, fresco, 127 × 104 cm, AD 62–79, Museo Archeologico nazionale de Napoli.

Figure 4. *Medea*, Herculaneum, fresco, found on 31 December 1739, Museo Archeologico nazionale de Napoli. Engraving, fol., 48 × 36 cm, by Nicola Vanni and Rocco Pozzi from a drawing by La Vega, in *Le Antichità di Ercolano Esposte*, VV.AA. vol. 1, pl. 13, 1757–1787.

it as being ajar. Interlacing her fingers, she supports a metal sword in her half-open hands. Again, her face is half covered in shadow, partly suggesting the volume of her head and figure, partly emphasizing her gaze, which but faintly retains the expression of agonized pain. Still, to find the qualities which dominate his final version of *Medea*, Delacroix would have to look for other models.

The artist considered the subject of Medea from very early on. In a sketchbook dating back to 1820, when in his early twenties, he notes: "Medea kills her 2 children".[14] That Medea kills her children is the foremost aspect indicated by Delacroix, followed by the event of her deceitful ruse bringing death to King Peleus (Pélias). On 4 March 1824 the journal kept by Delacroix registers a shorthand note: "Medea preoccupies me" ("Médée m'occupe"). For lack of continuity of his journal—discontinued in June 1832 to reopen in January 1847—the next reference to Medea occurs in 1836. In a letter to a friend, Delacroix writes: "The awful heat in my study makes work almost impossible. I have begun work on the Medea who goes on well; we will see."[15] Except for these brief comments

14. "Médée tue ses 2 enfants", reference to the Louvre sketchbook RF 9153, fol. 8. "He had also listed the actual subject of this painting as early as 1820" (Johnson 1986, p. 80).

15. Letter to Frédéric Villot, 20 July 1836: "ensuite il fait une chaleur affreuse dans mon atelier qui m'y rend presque le travail impossible, J'ai commencé la Médée qui se débrouille; nous verrons" (Delacroix 1935, p. 416).

further mentions of the subject are lacking. In a mediated reading of Aristotle, he may have found that shocking subject matter in art has a long and honourable history.[16] To a young painter the "furious Medea", the tragedy of a mother's killing of her young sons, would have offered an opportunity to inquire into his own affectionate relation to a lost mother. Delacroix initiated his journal, in which he carried out a straightforward dialogue with himself, with an entry on 3 September 1822, eight years to the day after his beloved mother's death in 1814. When realizing the coincidence, he called upon her spirit to be present and close to him in his continuous writing. "Spirit" in the English translation refers to *ombre*, the word de facto used; thus, he asks her to be present as something like a "shadow" whenever he turns to his journal.[17] From then on, she is nominally absent; only in 1857 does he again mention his mother and her dear memory.[18]

Any beholder familiar with psychoanalytic thinking, and with a knowledge of the artist's yet-unrealized works, would be unwilling to disregard his seemingly prosaic association between mother and "shadow". Pliny tells the story of how visual art was unintentionally invented when a young woman in Corinth, wishing to preserve the memory of her beloved, drew the outline of his shadow as it appeared on a wall. Although the journal lacks any mention of Pliny's anecdote, one might sense an echo from it in Delacroix's specific association of mother, "shadow", and memory.

Visiting the Louvre, Delacroix contemplated representations of ideal maternity. In April 1823 he made a note of having spent hours admiring Andrea del Sarto's *Charity*, the virtuous mother figure who lavishes all the goodness of her body and mind on the infants surrounding her. "What grace, nobility, and strength in his children! [...] I wish I had time

16. Voltaire, discussing Aristotle in the 'Questions sur l'Encyclopédie par des amateurs', cites some well-known lines from Boileau's *L'Art poétique*, which credit the arts with the power to reduce the shock of disagreeable subject matter: "There is no serpent, nor odious monster/ Which, turned into art would not please the eye/ A delicate brush may turn the most horrible object into a fine piece of art:/ So, in order to charm us, tearful tragedy/ Transforms a bloodstained Oedipe into pleasing pain" (my translation of: "Il n'est point de serpent ni de monstre odieux/ Qui par l'art imité ne puisse plaire aux yeux:/ D'un pinceau délicat l'artifice agréable/ Du plus affreux objet fait un objet aimable:/ Ainsi, pour nous charmer, la Tragédie en pleurs/ D'Oedipe tout sanglant fit parler les douleurs"), see Mras 1966, p. 27, n. 60.

17. *Delacroix 1980*, 5 September 1822, p. 3. Victoire Oeben Delacroix (1758–1814) died when Eugène was 16 years old.

18. *Delacroix 1980*, 23 December 1857.

Figure 5. Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, *The Massacre of the Innocents*, 1512, engraving, 28.3 × 43.6 cm. Musée du Louvre, collection Edmond de Rothschild.

to make a copy."[19] Delacroix fully acknowledged the need to "imitate [one's predecessors] virtually without interruption", willingly and unknowingly.[20] The classical pictorial tradition with its emphasis on line was early revealed to him, as if brought to life in and by the work of Raphael, represented by his paintings in the Louvre and in the form of engravings.[21] One month after writing the note that "Médée m'occupe", he bought a print of Marcantonio Raimondi's engraving *The Massacre of the Innocents* after drawings of the same subject by Raphael (fig. 5).[22] Two drawings in a sketchbook from around 1820 testify to his earlier knowledge of the figural details in the engraving.[23] Both drawings are studies of the crouched woman in the foreground, leaning on one knee, holding her child in one arm and raising her other arm in a gesture of self-defence. For his future *Medea* he would shift focus to the woman on

19. *Delacroix 1980*, 15 April 1823, pp. 10–11.

20. Sieben-Meier 1963; quote from Peter Hecht (1980, p. 195).

21. *Delacroix 1980*, 30 December 1823: "Oh! Raphael's beautiful *Holy Family*!"

22. *The Massacre of the Innocents*, engraved by Marcantonio Raimondi after design by Raphael about 1510, published and discussed in Ekserdjian & Henry 2022, pp. 182–183. Two powerful paintings also depicting massacres were shown at the 1824 Salon: *Scène du massacre des Innocens [sic]* by Léon Cogniet, and, by Delacroix, the *Massacres de Scio* (Johnson 1986, p. 80).

23. Lichtenstein 1971, p. 532, figs 50–51, two studies by Delacroix of *A Mother and Child* after Raphael's *The Massacre of the Innocents*, pencil, 20.5 × 20 cm, Cabinet des Desseins, Musée du Louvre, cat. nos 17 and 18.

Figure 6. Delacroix, *Study of Medea*, *c.* 1836, pencil on paper, 22 × 15.5 cm. Reproduced in Sérullaz 1963, picture 253.

the centre left. Her body is facing forwards as she looks back, while holding her child and running to escape (figs 6 and 7). Delacroix's *Medea* clearly owes her strongly turned head and, not least, the position of her half-lifted right foot to the running mother in the engraving.

In 1830 Delacroix would characterize Raphael: "His execution: shy but precise, since the ideas and the emotions were pure in his mind. The neglects of entirety, of proportions, of aerial perspective, of costume [...] do not prevent his figures from living in the soul conveyed by him: their eyes live."[24]

In 1836, when finishing the large *Saint Sebastian Tended by the Holy Women*, Delacroix finally found the appropriate idea to represent Medea. The motifs appear side by side in a pen and sepia wash sketch,

Figure 7. Delacroix, *Study of Medea*, *c.* 1836, pencil on paper, 21 × 33.5 cm. Reproduced in *Delacroix (1798–1863)* (2018), cat. 99, p. 157. Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts.

24. My translation of Delacroix's annotation: "Raphaël. Son execution: timide mais précise, parceque les idées et les sentiments étaient nets dans son esprit. Les fautes d'ensembles, de proportions, de perspective aérienne, de costume (Apollon avec un violon) n'empèchent pas ses figures de vivre de l'âme qu'il leur communiquait: ses yeux vivent." Unpublished notes for the article of Delacroix in *Revue de Paris*; Delacroix 1981, p. 826.

Figure 8. *Saint Sebastian and Medea*, c. 1836, sketch, pen and sepia wash, 19.1 × 31.5 cm. Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts.

Saint Sebastian and Medea, most likely made in 1836 (fig. 8). A significant link, charged with ambivalence, is the representation of the vulnerability of the young male body, exposed in close connection to the women. The figure group of *Medea* and her sons finds its shape, through the insisting lines in a suite of drawings, as a reversal of del Sarto's *Charity*, as well as of the defensively crouching and running mothers in Raimondi's *Massacre of the Innocents* after Raphael.

"The penumbra that swallows up her gaze". An enigma preserving its complexity

When shown at the Salon in 1838, the painting was celebrated as a chef d'oeuvre by most critics. "*Medea About to Kill Her Children* is linked to the same order of ideas that produced the frescoes in [the *Salon du Roi*]. It is an ancient subject worked out with modern intelligence and in forms more human than ideal", wrote Théophile Gautier.[25] Attentive to Medea's

25. *Delacroix*, New York 2018, p. 113 n. 31; Gautier 1838.

limited range of options to act in the drama, Alexandre Decamps found that "the love of a mother [clutching her children] that is so passionate, so frenetic, that she will stab them rather than abandon them into the hands of her enemies, is the complete expression of a violent passion in its greatest energy and truth".[26] Étienne-Jean Delécluze, usually not appreciative of Delacroix's art, wrote that everyone who saw the painting was moved by it because it had "an ardour" and "a carnal existence", moving the spectator with great force.[27] Even so, he found reason to question the "awkwardness to the eye" of the children ("Pourquoi ses enfants sont-ils si disgracieux à l'oeil?") and also the perceived lack of majesty of Medea, who, if not for the dagger, would merely look like a mother trying to keep her children away from a great danger.[28]

Frédéric de Mercey took a specific interest in the detail of the shadowed eye of Medea and of the effect that fury may have on beauty:

> If Iphigenia was the daughter of Goethe's imagination, Medea is the daughter of Delacroix, this fiery, expressive, harsh painter of *The Massacres at Chios* who cares little about changing his form. Notwithstanding, his Medea will remain forever true, due to being most of all a passionate woman. [...] The expression of her panting head, looking backwards, is superb. Brilliant sunlight hits the entire body of the sorceress, only her forehead and eyes are in the dark; this forehead in the dark, and this terrible and veiled gaze, do have an admirable effect. All in all, the movement of the figure is full of rage and emotion. [...] This furious and deceived woman is no longer a mother, and to avenge herself of her perfidious husband, if killing them will cause him despair, she will tear her children apart with her own hands. To take vengeance and then die is all that she thinks about. Even if her mouth says nothing, the feverish excitement of her whole being shows her pale head rising like that of a serpent, with a dark gaze, and with shivering lips. [...] Mr. Delacroix has been criticized for not having made Medea more beautiful; but a more beautiful Medea would have been less true. Of all the passions, it is fury which alters the harmony of a face, without which there is no beauty. Other observations of details are more well-founded: the shadow covering the forehead and the upper part of the face is too

26. Johnson 2011, p. 180 n. 80.
27. Johnson 2011, p. 182.
28. Sérullaz 2001, p. 52.

> dryly cut. Strangely adding to the effect, it still feels too dark; the grip of the right hand does not make sense, the drapery is too heavy and one would wish that its folds were given a finer brush work.[29]

Another way of putting it, according to *La Quotidienne* of 2 March 1838:

> The picture is striking in aspect; one feels truly moved at the sight of this demented mother with a haggard eye, pale face, dry, livid mouth, palpitating flesh, and oppressed bosom. There is an admirable animation in these three figures and a vigour in the drawing and colour which surprises, touches and cancels out the one thing one might hold against Eugene Delacroix, the shadow thrown across the top of Medea's face.[30]

To the critics of 1838, whose general viewpoint marks an engagement in formal, aesthetic concerns, keeping a stance outside the pictorial reality, Medea and her children aesthetically and emotionally represent the imaginary "other". However, the critical response to the mother's shaded eye, although guarded from the boys as well as from the beholders of the painting, seems to have activated a primordial terror: a gaze such as this implies the imminent threat of death, caused by maternal hatred turned into madness. In 2018, some 180 years later, the effect of the play of shadows was spelled out as follows: "Delacroix made ingenious use of the narrative power of the lighting; as the shadow cast by the dagger onto the child's thigh symbolically cuts into its flesh, the mother's blinding hatred is evoked by the penumbra that swallows up her gaze. At the same time, her brightly lit breasts and hands accentuate her monstrous anomality."[31]

The oil sketch

Would the significance of visual art change if some of its primary agents, the lines of the pen and the traces of the brush, demonstrating the materiality and radiance of paint itself, were conveyed in purely semantic concepts and so became "readable"? Constantly confiding to his journal, and with all his philological intelligence, Delacroix insists on the power of the visual medium and its specific impact on the imagination and the

Figure 9. *Medea on the Point of Killing her Children*, *c.* 1836, oil sketch on canvas, 46 × 38 cm. Provenance: Delacroix's posthumous sale, February 1864, lot 139. Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts, inv. no. P 933.

29. de Mercey 1838, pp. 384–385; my translation and italics.
30. Anonymous 1838; my translation.
31. *Delacroix 2018*, p. 116.

emotional life that he shares with the beholder, as distinguished from conceptual thinking and writing.[32]

Contemplating Delacroix's oil sketch of *Medea* (fig. 9)—based on printed and digital versions of the picture which replace the inevitably fading memory left by the painting back in 2018—my thinking finds its way, step by step. What an unstable way of descending this steep wilderness! Within the small picture the effect of a strong wind whips the cape around the woman's head into a dark sail. The distant sky, reduced to a vertical strip, materializes through diving strokes of yellow and white suggesting the activity of flickering sunlight. Two pale patches of paint suggest a sea surface. The shape of the rock blocking the seascape is distinctly modelled; with its sunlit and shadowed parts it resembles a handle, an antipode to the loosely sketched foreground. The setting is indicated by blurred strokes of umber green and ashen grey, covering a layer of yellow. Subdued maroon, greenish and dark blue planes in the upper part of the picture frame its lower half, dominated by figures embodied by loose movements of the paint brush. Close to the foreground they tend to dissolve, like a phantasm. Still, traced contours of the woman's feet and the legs of the older boy stand out as remaining marks from an underlying layer of red. The skirt—is it a pair of oriental trousers? —assumes a dark violet shape traced with long strokes of pink; the hip cloth is painted in thickly applied strokes of golden yellow. Tight brush strokes of white highlight the naked parts of the woman and her infant child; the torso of the older child is shaded by reddish-brown accents. A thin stroke of white paint along the knife hints at the sharpness of the blade. Medea's eye is ablaze, with a darker crescent suggesting an iris at the center. Her face, with its flat nose, swollen jaw and gaze turned inwards, recalls the images of barbaric rulers on ancient coins.[33]

Does the free-flowing character of the oil sketch demonstrate that Delacroix painted in an act of imagining the agony and fury of an archaic Medea? Did he experience her pain and the children's panic while man-

32. As in the entry of 8 October 1822: "When I have painted a fine picture I have not given expression to a thought! [That] [...] would strip painting of all its advantages. A writer has to say almost everything in order to make himself understood, but in painting it is as if some mysterious bridge were set up between the spirit of the persons in the picture and that of the beholder. [He] sees figures, the external appearance of nature, but inwardly he meditates; the true thinking that is common to all men" (Delacroix 1981, pp. 28–29; my translation).

33. Medea's traits remind one of some of the female profiles on Greek and Roman coins drawn by Delacroix in 1825.

aging the flowing medium of paint? Does the quality of the seemingly unrestrained strokes of paint imply a moment of access to emotionally charged impulses? Later in his life, in a plea for the art of painting, he would offer an implicit response to these questions, specifying that "the type of emotion peculiar to painting is, so to speak, t*angible* [...] The figures and objects in the picture, which to one part of your intelligence seem to be the actual things themselves, are like a solid bridge to support your imagination as it probes the deep, mysterious emotions, of which these forms are, so to speak, the hieroglyph, but a hieroglyph far more eloquent than any cold representation, the mere equivalent of a printed symbol."[34] Delacroix's trust in the pictural medium as a membrane for visualizing concepts and experiences of his inner life seems never to have faltered.[35]

"A representation of thinking about a picture more than a representation of a picture". The 1838 Salon painting

While renouncing the arrangement of a neatly staged and illuminated Pompeiian hallway, the drama of Delacroix's full-size *Medea* materializes in a dark and shallow space suggesting an open cave lined with crumbling stone (fig. 1). A slanting shadow marks the form of a protruding roof. Sunlight finds its way through an opening in the rock. While flooding light exposes the woman who closely hugs two naked children, darkness spreads and fills the cave behind their bodies, as if the very essence of shadow had turned into a substance that absorbs any lingering trace of light.

At first sight the group of three appears to be seeking refuge from some pursuing threat in this no-man's-land. Turning her head, with an ear freed from her loose hair, Medea seems to listen for distant sounds. The figurative components of the oil sketch reappear, though monumentalized with smoothly modelled surfaces within firm contours, in accordance with the ideal of academic painting, but also following an early observation. While in 1824 meditating on the subject of Medea,

34. Delacroix 1980, 20 October 1853, p. 213; my italics.

35. Discussing the concern with rapid execution which relates Delacroix to the Impressionists, Lee Johnson observes an essential difference in the reason for such speed: while the Impressionists sought to record nature's shifting shades of colour, Delacroix required speed to preserve the vitality of his imaginative inventions, "the ideal carried in his mind" (quote from Delacroix 1980, 12 October 1853), or of his recollections. This emotive and expressive handling of brushstrokes would vary in size, shape and direction "following the idea or the emotion" ("suivant l'idée ou le sentiment") and in a technique that Delacroix would call "strokes of emotion" ("hachures de sentiment") (Johnson 1963, p. 103–104).

Delacroix added a note on the art of Raphael in his journal: "The first and most important thing in painting is the contour. Even if all the rest were to be neglected, provided the contours were there, the painting would be strong and finished [...] *think constantly about it, and always begin that way*. It is to this that Raphael owes his finish."[36]

The painted figure of Medea, a woman with magic gifts, claims the entire pictorial space. With bare breasts and arms, adorned with an oriental diadem set with pearls and red and blue gems, and an earring with a gleaming dark sapphire, her white body is close to the picture surface and larger than life. A tress of hair trails along her left arm with the effect of visually distorting its shape, as does the hair of the child against the lower part of her arm. There is a striking contrast between her slender arms, a conventional sign of feminine beauty, and the heavy burden represented by the children. Another move forward, and she will traverse the border of the canvas. Suggesting the form of an unstably raised ellipse, her figure is weighed down by a skirt draped in heavy folds which preclude all perception of the position of her legs. Is she moving forward, half standing, or rather about to seat herself? The unclear intention of her posture retains an unresolved tension. As she looks back, her bare feet blindly seem the flat stones needed to support the weight of her body and that of the struggling burden in her arms. Does she simply know where to tread in this desolate place?

The slanting ground of the cave literally hazards the balance of the figure group. It is a site where glistening vegetation and venomous snakes thrive, material for magic charms and poison. The grotto is a proper place for a sorceress, an aspect of Medea emphasized since the earliest versions of her myth and in the written tradition from Euripides, Ovid and Seneca to Pierre Corneille. In the tradition, Medea in Corinth only ever dwells in a house or a palace. To Euripides she is a foreigner, a barbarian with a brilliant mind, endowed with magic gifts, emotionally a feminine human being and with a life adjusted to Greek habits. In Seneca's Roman version of the tragedy, Medea's magic means are described by the Nurse who tells of the deadly herbs and serpent's venom gathered from heaven, earth and hell to poison the gifts to Princess Creusa.[37] Only Corneille makes his baleful *Médée* explicitly finish her incantations in a magic grotto.[38]

36. Delacroix 1980, 7 April 1824; italics following the original.

37. Seneca, *Medea*, c. 50 CE, Act IV, Scene 1.

38. Corneille 1634, Act IV, Scene 2. Delacroix may have had the idea of a cave from reading Corneille's seldom-performed tragedy.

This dark space would metaphorically imply an existential core of femininity, the womb of life and—by the logic of an interlaced dichotomy—death.

A loop of soft material between Medea's breasts is tied to a blue ribbon. The red cloth draped around her waist, and the double bend of its extension, suggest the brim of a skirt. While the delicate pinkish material has connotations of perishable flesh, the heavily falling forms of red cloth suggest the effect of gushing blood. With her right arm Medea seizes the older boy's arm while pressing the blond infant's head to her bosom. A blotch of shaded pink, the colour of his mother's nipples, marks the little boy's cheek, and his eyes are brimming with tears. While his contracted hands stand out, and his genitals are exposed, his belly and thighs appear as parts of his mother's pale lustrous flesh. The children, cramped to their mother's body like terrified cubs in the jaws of a lioness, wriggle awkwardly, half losing their proper forms in her grasp. Cries, unheard by her, rise from their stifled throats, buried as they are in her arms.[39] They can sense, rather than hear, the rhythm of her panting. In this instant Medea, her shadowed eye turned away, is on the point of ending her motherhood.

The focus of Medea's profiled eye is lost in some remote unseen. Her gaze is veiled, visibly an effect of the darkness emanating from the rock. The shape of her eye strangely echoes the sky appearing in a gap close to the cave. Does the darkness rather protect and clear her sight—and her restless mind—from the light of the day?[40] Does she seek the shadow to sharpen her sight while, like a wounded animal, watchfully focusing on her pursuers, still out of sight? After all, she is guilty of yet other crimes, most recently having caused the gruesome death of Princess Creusa and her father, the king of Corinth. The dagger, a dark vertical clasped in Medea's left hand, casts a shadow on the strained thigh of her older son. His face is lost in her shadow, but there is a glimpse of his eyes, staring as if to communicate a message to the spectator: "For the love of gods, stop this!"[41] The boy's gaze, breaking out of his mother's body, performs

39. "[…] she is like a bull or a lioness with cubs, that's how she looks": Euripides 2008, lines 215–216; cries of the children: Euripides 2008, lines 1271–1278.

40. It is interesting to note that the shadow touching the eyes of the left woman in the first painted version of *The Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1834) is an added, alluring detail in the painting entirely absent in the watercolour study made on the spot during Delacroix's voyage to North Africa in 1832 (Mras 1966, pp. 56–57, fig. 14).

41. Euripides 1912, p. 71: "A child: 'Yes, in God's name! Help quickly ere we die!' The other child: 'She has almost caught me now. She has a sword.'"

the effect of a metaphorical slit in the fabric of the image, as a sign effectively crossing the border between realities of imaginary and virtual space, addressing the beholder with a desperately direct appeal. This is the moment when the painting abjures its condition of being a mere artefact and gains agency, silently claiming a compassionate response from an eye outside its frame of identity.[42]

How is it that the critics, writing about *Medea* at the Salon of 1838, shunned the most poignant signal breaking out of the pictorial reality of the painting? Three isolated gazes, turned in different directions, chart a triangle of pain: that of the mother, containing the darkness of agony; that of the infant flooded with tears; that of the boy, beseechingly addressing the beholder. Still, the artist imagined and painted his cry. Did I discern this unvoiced triangular figure of gazes, when confronted with the painting in 2018? What I did see, instantly, struck by the visualized passionate pain, was an act of implosion of timeless motherhood. I found myself pleading: "Medea, stop whatever you're about to do, don't tread further into this madness. Save your reason, your sons and yourself! Granddaughter of the Sun, get out of this dark place and find a different destiny for yourself and for them, a future without endless suffering and loss."—candidly compassionate reactions of a beholder of the 20th century, erupting on the threshold of a dialogue with a painted tragedy.

Gendered ethics

In his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, investigating the passions affecting the human mind, Edmund Burke claims that "Most of the ideas which are capable of making a powerful impression on the mind, whether simply of Pain or Pleasure [...] may be reduced very nearly to these two heads, *self-preservation* and *society*; to the ends of one or the other of which all our passions are calculated to answer. The passions which concern *self-preservation* turn mostly on *pain* and *danger*." While ideas of life and health make no such impression by their simple enjoyment, the passions "which are conversant about the *preservation of the individual* turn chiefly on *pain* and *danger* and they are the most powerful of all the passions".[43] Jason's bonding with the Princess of Corinth is a befitting advance within *society*, considering

42. Bredekamp 2021, chs 2 and 5.

43. Burke 1757, 1759, part I, section VI: "Of the passions which belong to self-preservation." "The individual" in Burke's thinking is by implication a male human being. Italics according to the original.

that enjoyable sexual stakes to "the generation of mankind [are] a great purpose, and it is requisite that men should be animated to the pursuit of it by some great incentive".[44] If his betrayal initially strikes Medea with the pain of despair, it is when realizing the consequence of a fatal loss of her own place in society, directly affecting her *self-preservation*, that the acute pain of fury directs her further actions.

Although at times expressing an intense love for her children, Medea does not celebrate the powers and duties of the womb. In a monologue early in Euripides' tragedy she addresses the women of Corinth, expressing her deep regrets of woman's lot as compared to that of men: "Men tell us we live safe and secure at home, while they must go to battle with their spears. [...] I'd rather stand there three times in battle holding up my shield than give birth once."[45] And when her strategy for revenge against Jason amounts to killing their sons, she takes not to sly poison, which is the weapon of cunning women, but to the knife. In this classic context the knife in Medea's hand is clearly gendered. A knife and a sword are the utensils of men, used for slaying other men, for killing women and sacrificial animals. Pointed weapons manifest a deadly intention. Delacroix's painting suggests an association between the blade of the knife and Medea's shaded eye. On her mind, implicitly in her gaze, is the pragmatically self-centred Jason, the object of her passion, a man who, disregarding ethics and without remorse, has broken their marital union that was confirmed with an oath sworn by the gods.[46] The pain implicated in what she is about to do has turned into the desire to cause him even greater pain in revenge for having deserted her and the children for a profitable royal marriage.

Did Delacroix imagine and purposely represent the figure of Medea as metaphorically binary? Her eye, intrinsically associated with the mind, and her hand, seizing the knife, would rather signify male heroic action for the sake of defending (her) justice, whereas her uncovered breasts, her thighs and womb, although covered by dark cloth and thus concealed, unambiguously accentuate a sensual female radiance and implicate a space of primary maternity. Captured in a state of sharply conflicting

44. Burke 1757, 1759, part I, section IX: "The final cause of the difference between the passions belonging to Self-Preservation and those which regard the Society of the Sexes."

45. Euripides 2008, lines 287–292.

46. Foley 1989, p. 65. For my analysis of Delacroix's *Medea* I am indebted to Foley's philologically oriented reading of the implications of gender in Euripides' *Medea*.

ethics—a male heroic ethics focused on justice and (her own) honour, and a female ethics focused on (her) motherly love and protection of life—Medea's mind is caught in an agonizing moment of entangling arguments. Her anguished monologue, opening with a desperately irresolute "I" and ending in a decomposed "you [my heart]—woman—I'm so sad", corresponds to the moment of "just before", visualized in the painting.[47] Does her shaded gaze signify a point of momentary existential collapse, caused by the contradiction between identification with a (patriarchal) ethics of restoration of honour through revenge, and the unbearable experience of being a mother about to sever the dearest part of herself?[48]

Reading the monologue, leaving aside the question of authenticity when referring to any distant original version, I cannot but wonder at the surviving vestiges of (say) empathic insight into the mind of a woman (although exceptional) shown by an Antique tragedian by means of male actors to his audience (of male citizens). Years after first painting *Medea*, Delacroix compared Euripides to Aeschylus while specifically stressing the human elements of pain and contrasts in Euripides' plots: "[...] he is sharper [more painful]; he looks for effects, for contrasts. Plots become more complicated as men feel the need to appeal to new sources of interest, which are being discovered in the human soul."[49]

"A more beautiful Medea would have been less true"

Intending to capture the attraction of *Medea* when first shown at the Salon of 1838, the critics used terms such as "ardour" and "carnal existence", highlighting visualized sexual implications which only barely agree with Voltaire's ambiguous comment on beauty.[50] However, qualities such as these do not fundamentally diverge from the understanding of beauty as suggested by Edmund Burke, who calls beauty a "social" quality, not least bearing on the procreation of the species.[51] In his further exposition, the "*Beautiful*" remains founded on the sense of pleasure, implying qualities

47. Euripides 2008, p. 60, lines 1460–1472.

48. The moment of an existential collapse on Medea's part marks a visual antonym to the moment of confirmation of a newborn child, demonstrated in the existential gesture of "handing over"; see Jessica Sjöholm Skrubbe's contribution in this volume.

49. Delacroix 1981, 23 February 1858, p. 708: "[...] il est plus poignant; il cherche des effects, des oppositions: les artifices de la composition s'augmentent avec la nécessité de s'adresser à des sources nouvelles d'interêt qui se découvrent dans l'âme humain."

50. Note 16.

51. Burke 1757, 1759, part I, section X, 'Of Beauty' opens: "The passion which belongs to generation, merely as such, is lust only. [...] The object therefore of this mixed passion which we call love, is the *beauty* of the sex." Italics according to the original.

such as clarity (with special reference to the eye and to sight), lightness, smallness, smoothness, delicacy (aspects of a "feminine" nature). Beauty is a quality within the realm of painting, which Burke defines as a "clear representation". But whereas "pleasure [shared with someone else] of any kind quickly satisfies",[52] the passions which concern the "self-preservation" of the individual predominantly turn on pain and danger; "they are the most powerful of all the passions".[53] Whatever excites the ideas of pain and danger is a source of the "*Sublime*". The sublime has the power of producing the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling.[54] In Burke's exegesis, this potent category finds its application in the realm of words and is based on the experience of pain, fear, horror and death. It is caused by effects such as the obscure, the great, the rigid, the vast. Obscurity is sublime because it frustrates the power of vision.[55] Physiologically, it induces pain by making us strain to see that which cannot be comprehended.[56]

"Brilliant sunlight hits the entire body of the sorceress, only her forehead and eyes are in the dark; this forehead in the dark and this terrible and veiled gaze do have an admirable effect." The message of the metaphor guiding de Mercey's line of observations is that of mortal danger, embodied in the mesmerizing shape of a serpent, a primary object of terror.[57] It agrees with the passion of "self-preservation" (as experienced by the spectator) caused by the sublime, leaving little space for the convivial passion of "society" which relates to beauty. To the men confronted by Delacroix's *Medea*, the ambiguous signs of sensual beauty, passion and fury were foregrounded. The idea that the passion of self-preservation is common to all human beings, men and women alike, may not have been all too obvious to them. Any visual indication of empathy with the protagonist is entirely on the painter's part.

As to "brilliant sunlight"—whereas mere light is a source of pleasure—this sensation brings a force that may transform from pleasure and turn

52. Burke 1757, 1759, part I, section II, 'Pain and Pleasure': "Pleasure of any kind quickly satisfies; and when it is over, we relapse into indifference, or rather we fall into a soft tranquility."

53. Burke 1757, 1759, part I, section VI, 'Of the passions which belong to self-preservation'.

54. Burke 1757, 1759, part I, section VII, 'Of the sublime'.

55. My conclusion from Burke 1957, 1959, part IV, section XVI, 'The cause why darkness is terrible'.

56. Mitchell 1986, p. 126.

57. Burke 1757, 1759, part II, section II, 'Terror'. For de Mercey's line of observations, see note 29.

into pain and danger, obscuring the sense of the eye.[58] Halfway through his *Enquiry* Burke concludes that however distinct the causes of two basic categories, we must expect to find the qualities of things the most remote imaginable from each other unite in the same object. If "two ideas as opposite as can be imagined", for instance light and darkness, or life and death, are "reconciled in the extremes of both", they concur in producing the sublime.[59] Also, we must expect to find combinations of the same kind in the works of art.[60] The intrinsic tension between opposed ideas representing the sublime in Burke's aesthetics would seem to find a certain vicinity in Freud's concept of the "uncanny". In the tragedy of *Medea*, the "sublime" would tend to correlate to the impending turn from the homely safe to the dark moment of unrepresentable horror.

Concluding reflections

My method of analysis gives priority to the affective commitment involved in artistic creativity and in interpretation serving as a way of scientific knowledge. Artistic creativity and scholarly interpretation share a precarious disposition: both activities precondition a state of not knowing the result of the complex investigation beforehand. In certain respects, the activities radically diverge: while the artist's work tends to rise in silence and to shun the use of words, the scholar's discourse is strongly dependent on conceptual thinking and "talk". Delacroix mastered both practices, often contemplating the potential of a "bridging" interconnection between the pictural medium and thinking. While his fully published diary, the *Journal*,[61] is an invaluable source of knowledge of his dialogue with artistic predecessors and with his own ambitions and convictions, it also offers a privileged site for continued dialogue over time. Wary of the obvious multiple distances involved, I have joined the painter with the intention to glimpse fragments of his way of thinking in words with relation to the pictorial subject. The fact that the corpus of Delacroix's oeuvre is well documented, having come into state possession both early and successively, greatly facilitates the search for sketches and

58. Burke 1757, 1759, part II, section XVI, 'Light'.

59. Mitchell 1986, p. 128: "Burke's dialectical method, whether we praise it as sublime rhetoric or denounce it as self-contradiction, is grounded in what he regards as the physical structure of the human senses."

60. Burke 1757, 1759, part II, section XXVIII, ending lines of 'The Sublime and Beautiful Compared'.

61. Referred to as Delacroix 1980 and Delacroix 1981 in the bibliography.

notebooks which may shed light on the elaboration of a specific pictorial idea, in this case of *Medea*.

Lacking a pre-existent pictorial tradition on the subject of Medea, Delacroix contemplated the theme of mothers and children over several years. His praise of the aesthetic ideal of Andrea del Sarto's *Charity* can be linked to his reminiscence of an early lost mother. The archaic figure of *Medea*, a mother who is faced with conflicting solutions, strongly opposes the virtuous *Charity*. G.E. Lessing, in his 1766 study dedicated to the *Laokoön* sculpture, celebrates a painter of the classic period for having represented Medea, not "at the moment when she was actually murdering her children, but a few moments before, when a mother's love was still struggling with her vengefulness".[62] Whatever information Delacroix may have had of the frescoes found in the Vesuvian area by the mid-18th century and onwards, he adhered to the convention, formed by Lessing, of leaving the murderous act to the imagination of the spectator. In Raphael's work Delacroix found a dramatic picture of mothers trying, but in vain, to save the lives of their infant boys: the *Massacre of the Innocents*. The pictorial emphasis given to line and contour, with a literary antecedent in the story of the origin of painting told by Pliny, was revealed to him early: "[Raphael's] execution: shy but precise, since the ideas and the emotions were pure in his mind. The neglects of entirety, of proportions, of aerial perspective [...] do not prevent his figures from living in the soul conveyed by him: their eyes live." To experience such a "bridging" connection between the "living eyes" in the picture and those of the beholder implies assigning a magic dimension to the picture. The free-flowing character of the oil sketch also indicates that Delacroix painted in an act of imagining the agony and fury of Medea. Only in the large-format version do Medea and her sons manifestly appear open to the beholder, not in the refined interior of a Corinthian house but in a cave in the wilderness. While their bodies are exposed to bright sunlight, a dark shadow veils her gaze.

The aim of my dialogue with the painting's visual implications has been to elucidate the sense of an enigma in *Medea*, embodied by the element of shadow. Significantly, the full effect of shadows comes into play only in the final painting. While light exposes the figure group, darkness fills the cave behind the bodies, spreading as if shadow has turned into a light-absorbing substance. The dagger in Medea's hand casts a shadow on

62. Lessing 1984, p. 21.

the thigh of her son, his face lost in her shadow; but there is a glimpse of his eyes staring as if to communicate a cry for help to the beholder. The sharply delineated shadow veiling Medea's eye, as Delacroix decided to paint it, is only partly an optical effect, emanating from the domed cave.

Michael Baxandall's analysis of the optical play of light and shadows in French 18th-century painting indirectly offers an instruction to grasp the nature of shadows in the *Medea* of 1838. While endowing the eyes of female figures in paintings of the 1830s with an appealing shadow—in *Saint Sebastian Tended by the Holy Women* and *The Women of Algiers in their Apartment*[63]—although thereby but marginally indicating an iconographic tradition, Delacroix veiled Medea's gaze metaphorically, *as if* either to suggest a sharpening of her sight, alternatively a loss of sight, physical or mental, or even to convey a moment of existential collapse; or, still, to allude to her "otherness" as a "sorceress", a "barbarian", "a different sort—dangerous to enemies, but well-disposed to friends".[64]

In practice, Baxandall's late reference to the "uncanny" is here shown to help shed light on the nature of Medea's shaded gaze. This Freudian concept, referring to the experience of horror at the sight of something familiar and "homely", something "old-established in the mind which has become alienated from it through the process of repression",[65] something which should have remained hidden but is now exposed, can be shown to pertain to the concepts of the "sublime", as expounded within an exploration of aesthetics by Edmund Burke in the 1750s. The sublime, based on the experience of pain, fear, horror and death, and, importantly, connected to the obscure, turns out to be useful as a key to capture the quality of haunting ambiguity which marks the painting, apparent to the critics of 1838 as well as to me. Not apparent to the critics, however, is the significant gendering of Burke's insisting on *self-preservation* as "the strongest of passions". The implied male prerogative in Burke's application of the concept of self-preservation, a "passion" present in the voice which Euripides assigns to Medea, only becomes apparent to a beholder of Delacroix's painting informed by 21st-century critical paradigms. The concluding reference to Burke's aesthetics presents itself as an instance of not knowing beforehand the unexpected turns of an investigation.

63. Note 40.
64. Euripides 2008, lines 808–810.
65. Freud 1955, pp. 363–364.

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