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Warning Against Empowered Women in France: Eugène Delacroix's *Medea About To Kill Her Children*

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Nineteenth-century France was a time of increasing freedom for women, though men sought to discourage this autonomy through criticism in the form of art. Caricatures depicted women abandoning their household duties and families. These depictions were a persuasive means of discouraging women who were intent on gaining more education and social rights and warned of the dangers of independence. Eugene Delacroix's *Medea About to Kill Her Children* (1838) can be seen as such a warning. The painting represents the ultimate act of evil a woman can commit- the murder of her children and communicates the consequences of women's freedom from martial obligation. Medea's abandonment of basic motherly instincts is reflected in the predicament of the nineteenth-century woman, who left her children to play a more active role in society. *Medea* is reminiscent of Renaissance illustrations of the Holy Family, and contrasts Mary's submission to the patriarchal authority of God with Medea's defiance of her husband. This article will discuss Delacroix's *Medea About to Kill Her Children*, and take a feminist approach to critically examine the painting and its context. Very little scholarship has been done in regards to *Medea About to Kill Her Children*, and by reading the painting in a feminist light, it can be better understood how art was employed to discourage women's rights and suppress their demands for social autonomy in nineteenth-century Paris.

Introduction

For women, nineteenth-century France was a time of increasing freedom, when women gained more and more economical and social autonomy. The Industrial Revolution enabled women to leave the confines of their homes and their traditional roles as housewives and mothers, and join men in the workplace, sharing in the financial earnings. Criticism followed this newly found freedom; in art women were shown as disruptive influences in society. Caricatures depicted women as burdensome menaces, abandoning their rightful duties in the household and their husbands and children. These depictions were a persuasive means of discouraging women who were intent on gaining more education and social rights and served as a warning of the dangers of educated, independent women.

Eugène Delacroix's *Medea About to Kill Her Children* (1838) can be seen as such a warning. With a personal history of negatively viewing women, Delacroix frequently depicted women as victims to the superior force of men. His long list of sexual conquests, including many of his models, suggests his objectification of women, which can be seen in his paintings of sensual and victimized women. However, while hinting at the contempt with which Delacroix held women, *Medea About to Kill Her Children* does not portray a beautiful, victimized woman, but a hardened and dangerous woman, acting in violence. The painting represents the ultimate act of evil a woman can commit: the murder of her children. Delacroix's portrayal of the moment right before the murder communicates the consequences of an independent, intelligent woman such as Medea left to her own devices, and the horrors that resulted in her freedom of martial obligation by Jason. Medea's abandonment of basic motherly instincts is reflected in the predicament of the nineteenth-century woman, who left their children and household duties to play a more active role in working and social spheres. Stylistically, the dark, tenebristic lighting, and the tension of the figures gives *Medea About to Kill Her Children* a dramatic and disturbing feel. The composition of the painting also suggests negativity- in a pyramidal form, *Medea* is reminiscent of Renaissance illustrations of the Holy Family, where Mary is the paradigm for female behavior. By connecting this painting to representations of the Holy Family, the viewer would contemplate the differences between a submissive, righteous mother such as Mary and the antithesis of motherhood that Medea represents.

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The threat of traditional familial roles breaking down in industrialized Paris discomfited many, particularly men as women began to join them in social and economical spheres previously available exclusively to men (McMillan 2000, p. 16). This article will demonstrate that Delacroix's *Medea About to Kill Her Children* represents the dangers of a woman gaining power, and is a warning, meant to discourage women in nineteenth-century Paris, who increasingly gained social autonomy and left their traditional roles as wives and mothers in the home.

Background

The late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought many social revolutions and reforms. The August 1789 "Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen" was an attempt to revolutionize the social order of the French monarchy into a republic where citizens had rights. This resulted in "universal suffrage" in 1792, exclusively for men over the age of twenty-one, as women were not considered autonomous citizens (McMillan 2000, p. 17). It was believed that women were less intelligent, and physically and mentally inferior to men, incapable of using such rights even if they were granted. Women were consigned to the home, designed to bear children and care for them. During this revolutionary period, women were virtually ignored, they were granted no privileges or property. However, feminist demands began to surface; documents such as *Les cahiers de doléances et réclamations des femmes* (1789) written by Madame B.B. addressed the issue of women and education (McMillan 2000, p. 17). She argued that if women were to receive a decent education, they could actively participate in their communities, and encouraged all women to make their voices heard on the subject. Continuing to argue for women's rights is the *Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* (1791) written by Olympe de Gouges (McMillan 2000, p. 16). This Declaration of the Rights of Women urges women to take part in the Revolution, and demands a part in reshaping their nation, in which they should hold a legitimate place in public and social affairs (McMillan 2000, p. 19). Female political clubs were formed, and women became more and more vocal about their rights. More feminist propaganda continued throughout the end of the century and into the next; the Revolution stirred women to demand more rights, and brought them out of domestic seclusion to the public spheres. By the mid 1800's, the urbanization and industrialization of Paris allowed women even more autonomy; they were able to earn money in many diverse ways- in factories, street trading, bar owners,

inn-keepers, and as manufacturers of textiles, soap, porcelain, buttons, and professions such as dressmaking, embroidery, glove-making (McMillan 2000, p. 70).

This political and social activism was condemned harshly. The feminine encroachment upon previously male dominated spheres threatened the social structure, and female laborers were considered disorderly. Pierre Gaspard Chaumette captured the male sentiment, one that would characterize male attitudes towards women for the century to come:

“Since when is it decent to see women abandoning the pious cares of their households, the cribs of their children, to come to public places, to harangue in the galleries, at the bar of the senate? Is it to men that nature confided domestic cares? No, she has said to man: ‘Be a man: hunting, farming, political concerns, toils of every kind, that is your appanage.’ She has said to woman: ‘Be a woman. The tender cares owing to infancy, the details of the household, the sweet anxieties of maternity, these are your labors...you will be the divinity of the domestic sanctuary.” (McMillan 2000, p. 30)

Men worked to draw clear boundaries between the public and private realms and felt increasingly threatened by the “dangerous” idea of women undermining their authority and the “natural” order of gender roles (McMillan 2000, p. 32). The bourgeois idea of a model family was headed by the patriarchal authority of the father, to whom wives and children submitted to and depended upon (McMillan 2000, p. 47) This family structure dominated historically, and the male population did not easily accept the increasing independence of women, and sought to undermine their efforts. This can be seen in the caricatures of *Honoré Daumier* (1808-1879), who used illustrations to make commentaries on contemporary social and political issues. His series of cartoons, “*Les Bas-Bleus*” (1844) and “*Les Femmes Socialistes*” (1849) mocks females who had the audacity to enter public spheres, voicing their opinions as equals to men, and the disharmony that such activists brought to society (Laughton 1996, p. 60). The women are illustrated with contempt, shown as raucous disrupters of society. They are unpredictable, unstable and emotive; in rebellion against their husbands and abandoners of their families, these are dangerous women, a “woman of ideas” who insisted on education, political rights, and social autonomy (McMillan 2000, p. 92). In contrast, Daumier’s *Monsieur, Madame et Bébé* (1860-63) presents a conventional family group, portrayed with a quiet intimacy. The woman is particularly gentle with her child as she nurses, and exemplifies feminine virtue and docility. This mother stands in contrast to the ugly, distorted faces of Daumier’s “women of ideas.” Daumier’s contempt reflects the unease

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of Parisian men, who saw “restless, bold, domineering” (McMillan 2000, p. 48) women who increasingly forwent their natural duties as a “creatures made to please...to seek support...who are inferior to men” (McMillan 2000, p. 48) and insisted on more equality and more social mobility.

Eugène Delacroix's Medea About to Kill Her Children (1838)

It is this social and political atmosphere discussed above that *Eugène Delacroix* (1798-1863) lived and painted. In the same spirit of Daumier, fearing the “dangerous,” educated women, Delacroix painted *Medea About to Kill Her Children* (1838). Delacroix was a part of the movement that revered the artist as a solitary “genius” who were misunderstood individuals that broke with institutionalized conventions, and rebelled against societal norms. Despite their willingness to abandon convention, these male artists still firmly believed that a female could not achieve intellectual or social equality with a man. As the writer Edmond Goncourt (1822-96) declared, “There are no women of genius, the women of genius are men” (Sturgis 2006, p. 165).

Delacroix certainly held this belief; his personal life was full of the sexual exploitation of women, and his works are full of victimized women, subject to the will of men rather than the increasingly empowered women of nineteenth century Paris. He had a long list of sexual conquests, mostly including his models, who he would have intimate relations with in his studio (Wright 2001, p. 70). In a letter to his friend, Felix Guillemardt, on December 1, 1823, he encouraged his friend to enjoy the same sexual appetites and abandon monogamy and fidelity, saying:

“You are moral and your pleasures are mingled with bitterness. In any case, they cannot all be so insipid, since that charming half of the human race which, we all know, gives so much pleasure to the other half, provides an occasional change from politics and card playing...in respect of that enchanting, seductive, and delightful sex...there are beauties to be found in provincial society...” (Stewart 1970, p. 115)

In the same letter, he goes on to compare the canvases in his studio to a “virgin” who would take “all the stuff [he] had in [him] to cover it” (Stewart 1970, p. 116).

This attitude is reflected in his paintings. His *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) portrays the King, Sardanapalus, who upon losing a war, has his slaves and possessions destroyed before

the conquering military force invades his city. Sardanapalus, thought to be a self portrait of Delacroix, surveys the chaos around him as the master of his domain with a calm air. Before him, the naked, sensual forms of women writhe, with luscious Rubenesque forms that are subjected to the violence of their captors. The female body becomes an object of pleasure, to be dominated and victimized by the superior force of men, as suggested by Sardanapalus' voyeuristic gaze as he observes the erotic, tortured forms of his slaves (Fraser 2003, p. 330). Similarly, *The Massacre of Chios* (1824) a scene about the Greek war of independence against the Turks, depicts beautiful, victimized, naked women who are helpless in the face of the male aggressors.

Delacroix's *Medea About to Kill Her Children* departs from Delacroix's sensual portrayal of victimized women, and instead presents a hardened, cruel villainess. The story of Medea is one of violence, family betrayal, and the ultimate rebellion against male authority. Medea, daughter of the king, aids the foreigner and hero Jason in his quest to retrieve the Golden Fleece, which would enable to him to achieve kingship in his own country. After Jason promises to take her with him and make her his queen, Medea helps him through a series of tasks, demonstrating her independence, intellect, and resourcefulness, betraying her family and country in the process. After the two escape, Medea murders and dismembers her brother, scattering his body parts in order to distract her father and prevent him from catching Jason. Upon reaching Jason's kingdom, he abandons Medea and his two children for another princess. Though Medea proved her cunning and bravery throughout the story, it is on this last scene Delacroix chose to depict; the moment in which Medea, so overcome by rage and thirst for revenge, murders her children. This moment of murderous passion exemplifies the romanticist belief that emotion could only champion reason if it were controlled by masculine intellect (Sturgis 2006, p. 165) and women were plainly susceptible to such weakness, leading to wild behavior with potentially devastating consequences. In this case, the death of Jason's children at the mother's hands is the result of a woman gaining too much power, who abused her intellect and whose freedom led to a disastrous outcome. Furthermore, Medea's horrifying murders undermine the foundation of patriarchal control (Raber 2000, p. 308). By betraying her father, the king, she challenges state authority, and by her destruction of Jason's offspring she discards her role as wife and mother (Raber 2000, p. 308).

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This is a warning to the men who would have viewed this painting; it was Delacroix's first mythological scene, accepted by the Academy, and displayed in the 1838 Paris Salon, and would have been visible to the very audience of bourgeois men who so feared women with power of any kind. Such women were considered disordered and uncontrollable, who could commit horrendous deeds- seen in the portrayal of Medea's murders, and in the nineteenth century woman's abandonment of her domestic duties.

Stylistically, Delacroix communicates his warning. In a shadowy grotto, only the hard planes of Medea's face are illuminated, giving her a hard, rigid appearance; she is unyielding and defiant. The deep shadows contrast with the light streaming in from the opening of the cave, and combined with the twisting, struggling forms of the children, the painting has an ominous and unsettled feel. Though Medea's breasts are bare, her body is anything but the sensual, curving forms of Delacroix's other women. Instead, she is well muscled, with strong broad shoulders and powerful arms that keep the children from escaping. Delacroix's brushstrokes are loose throughout the composition, particularly on the forms of the children and their clothing, adding to the action and movement, but Medea's form is linear, and darkly outlined at some points. This gives her the appearance of a tense force, imprisoning her squirming victims as they seek to evade the knife she will employ against them.

Most striking is the pyramidal form of the painting, which recalls Renaissance portrayals of the Holy Family, most notably Leonardo da Vinci's *Virgin of the Rocks* (1485) and Raphael's similarly composed *Madonna in the Meadow* (1505-6). The viewer, when faced with this familiar composition instantly connects and compares Medea to the Virgin Mary. Renaissance portrayals of the Mary and Christ were the quintessential family type, the Virgin Mary, mother of Christ, was the ultimate example of female virtue for women to emulate. The Virgin is the purest paradigm of maternal love, humility, and obedience. When approached by the angel Gabriel and commanded to bear the son of God, Mary responded with proper compliance, "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word" (James 1:38). Depictions of Mary with the Christ child and frequently John the Baptist, arranged in a pyramidal form, were the religious and social examples of good families during the Renaissance, an idea that continued in the nineteenth-century. Leon Battista Alberti, a prominent humanist writer during the fifteenth-century wrote extensively about women's roles, commenting that "beneath this roof, the woman remained and busied

herself in nourishing and caring for the child... [men] must, therefore, seek a woman suited to child bearing” (Alberti). This mindset continued strongly in the nineteenth-century. Julien-Joseph Virey (1776-1846) a naturalist during the Enlightenment, believed a woman’s existence was to be “naturally subordinated to man” and she was born for “sweetness, tenderness, patience and docility, and obligated to submit to constraints without protest, for the sake of peace and concord in the family” (McMillan 2000, p.5). By stylistically connecting *Medea About to Kill Her Children* with this Renaissance tradition, Delacroix not only legitimized his ideas, but also connected Medea with a very recognizable archetype for appropriate female behavior, a precedent that had been emphasized since the time of Alberti, Leonardo and Raphael.

With these familiar images of the Virgin Mary and her example of feminine perfection close in mind, the viewer is forced to see the blatant contrast between the two women. In both Leonardo’s and Raphael’s portrayals of the Virgin, her eyes are cast down to the Christ child in a pose of humility and complete devotion of a mother to her child. She tenderly places her hands upon Christ, a simple gesture of protection and adoration. The composition of both *Madonna in the Meadow* and *Virgin of the Rocks* is connected by the hand gestures of Mary; the figures are harmoniously linked with the Virgin as the central figure of a mother. In contrast, in *Medea About to Kill Her Children*, the figures are bound only by violence, with the two children desperately fighting to free themselves from Medea. She grips them tightly, almost strangling one while the other is smothered by the force she uses to hold them down. Medea’s turned head as she turns away from her children to a world where she craved power and Jason’s affection is so opposite of Mary’s humble gaze upon the Christ child. Instead of the soft, curving lines of the Virgin Mary, who is chastely clothed and in serene harmony with her surroundings, Medea is barbarically bare-chested, with more masculine, hard features. Medea and her children are backed into a claustrophobic, dark cave, with craggy wild rocks, similar to Leonardo’s *Madonna of the Rocks*, yet with more drama; tenebristic light creates rough surfaces of the rocks and Medea’s body, rather than the lighter tonalities and even lighting of *Madonna of the Meadow*. This communicates the idea that Medea is a woman of action, who unlike Mary’s willingness to submit to the authority of Gabriel and God, violently refuses to accept the decisions forced upon her. Instead of Mary’s acceptance of her fate in raising the son of God without his true father’s presence, Medea chose to end the lives of her children in the absence of Jason. Where Mary represents the divine role of

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motherhood, Medea is the ultimate betrayer of her sex, the antithesis of motherhood, who abandons her family in a moment of selfishness, a powerful woman who had known freedom and used it to rebel against patriarchal authority of both her father and Jason. With these elements of opposition in *Medea About to Kill Her Children* and the Renaissance depictions of Mary, Delacroix presents a scene where viewers could contrast the virtues of Mary and the ultimate betrayal of feminine duty of Medea.

Conclusion

This article demonstrated the changing definitions of women's roles and family structure in nineteenth-century Paris. With the newly found power and the shifting of social boundaries, women enjoyed economic success and social freedom, which threatened Parisian men who reacted with negativity to the new, "modern" woman. This article examined men's efforts to suppress women's freedom, and their encouragement of confinement to the home, by responding with mocking depictions of disruptive and scandalous women. This article critically examined Delacroix's depiction of *Medea About to Kill Her Children*, and demonstrated the perceived dangers of an educated, empowered woman Medea represents, particularly in deliberate contrast to images of the Virgin Mary, a symbol of female compliance as a virtuous mother. Delacroix's *Medea About to Kill Her Children* warns against the abandonment women's long-established roles as homemakers and demonstrates the consequences of women gaining too much freedom, paralleling the reality Parisian women gaining rights and independence in the nineteenth-century.

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