

Gwendolyn MacEwen's *Trojan Women*:

Old Myth into New Life

by Shelagh Wilkinson

Gwendolyn MacEwen's adaptation of the *Trojan Women*¹ is that rare thing — a creative — rather than a critical response to a classical text. MacEwen captures in her drama what feminist critics seek to achieve theoretically as they revision the androcentric canon. To read a contemporary woman poet's interpretation of an old myth means that we enter the text in a radically new way — especially if we come to it with a feminist ideology shaping our response.

MacEwen is a craftswoman; and as Margaret Atwood warns, "it is a temptation to become preoccupied with the original and brilliant verbal surfaces she creates at the expense of the depths beneath them."² In reading this *Trojan Women* one can easily get hooked on the wit of the dialogue and be distracted from the fundamental political ideas.

MacEwen's choice of this Euripidean drama is significant; it is a myth that contains within it the seeds of radical change. MacEwen has only to release a new set of facts inherent in the old story and the politicization of the women on-stage is underway.

MacEwen's stated preference lies in working with myth. In fact, she says that in her poetry she is concerned "with finding the relationships between what we call the 'real' world and that other world which consists of dream, fantasy and myth. I've never felt that these 'two worlds' are so separate as one might think."³

To transform Euripides' myth into contemporary experience MacEwen had to change the tone of the original radi-

cally. Gone are the catalogues of warriors and the endless lists of gods who did, or did not, intervene in the fight over Troy. Changed, too, is the traditionally pious choric voice, constantly commenting on the morality of the action and on the ethics of a culture. MacEwen shifts the action away from the city itself; although Troy is mentioned throughout the drama it is no longer the central symbol which released so much of the grief and mourning in Euripides' text. Poseidon is the only god put on stage by MacEwen, and Troy, he reminds us, was 'his.' But MacEwen cuts Poseidon's dialogue to comparatively few lines in the opening scene and she eliminates the pact between Poseidon and Athene totally; there will be no celestial power-mongering in this Drama.

Instead, the women on stage explore the iconic, stereotypic roles that have been traditional in a patriarchal culture dedicated to the adulation of the hero and to his code of honour. MacEwen's drama is an analysis of the limitations of 'honour' as this controls each woman specifically — and collectively in their relationships with each other. Poseidon himself tells us that Troy

...was a perfect society.

Women learned to sew; men learned to kill.

Honour and glory shone everywhere...
(pp. 34-5)

Traditionally honour has been what Lawrence Stone calls it: "the public verification of private worth"⁴ — and men have always sought it. But a woman's piety or chastity (her 'honour') does not accrue to her self-worth; it adds nothing to

her empowerment privately or publicly. In fact woman's chastity is just another aspect of man's honour; woman as property must remain 'purely' his. In selecting this as a central motif of the drama, MacEwen inevitably brings into question the nature of woman's sexuality.

There is no action — as such — in this play; instead it is the psychological battles between the women that drive the play along. MacEwen sets up the role that each woman has accepted, and then, by confronting the stereotype, she has the women move beyond otherness into autonomy.

MacEwen has all of the characters question, to varying degrees, the archetype of 'woman as sex object'; this refers the reader to the whole misogynistic background against which this drama is played out. We recall the rape of Leda by Zeus, the subsequent birth of Helen and the celestial bartering that resulted in her abduction and rape. Helen is

... a child of heaven, half-divine!...

a victim of my own divine loveliness.

(p. 73)

The myth of Helen has provided Western culture with one of its central archetypes: woman as sex-object; and every beauty parade pays *hommage* to the ownership clause in the cultural contract. The winner becomes just another possession.

In a similar way Andromache is totally bereft of self. She is the virtuous wife who insists:

...I was perfect for Hector's sake —

...I knew my place.

...I knew when to guide my man

and when to obey... (p. 59)

Because MacEwen focuses on the cultural definitions of woman — 'the wife,' 'the mother,' 'the beauty' — she is able to throw light on the deceptions that are intrinsic in this defining process.

Andromache is the epitome of virtue; her passivity and ignorance enrage Hecuba, who responds as a feminist might: "... your virtues begin to sicken me! Did you ever possess your *self* Andromache?" (p. 61) It is Hecuba who recognizes the enormous cost of piety and she will become the touch stone for confrontation and change as the drama unfolds.

It is useful to compare MacEwen's creative work with Carolyn Heilbrun's critical approach to another classical text *The Oresteia*. In her book, *Reinventing Womanhood*, Heilbrun analyzes alternative female responses to motherhood. For instance, Heilbrun suggests that what is murdered in *The Oresteia* is the principle of motherhood, "not its action in loving parenthood, but its establishment as an institution which must be de-mythologized and virtually destroyed."⁵ Heilbrun sees the Orestes and Electra figures as one — both seeking escape from "mother engulfment" which is, of course, a double jeopardy for girls who, as they become women, are "institutionalized into a role where re-birth, initiation, and selfhood are impossible."⁶ In MacEwen's *Trojan Women*, Hecuba prepares the women of Troy for just such an initiation. As surely as Orestes/Electra kills the principle of motherhood, so too Hecuba kills the principle of virtue inherent in the wife/mother role.

MacEwen's poetry is very close in its ideological base to Heilbrun's feminist thesis. MacEwen not only subverts the concept of institutionalized motherhood, she also subverts the androcentric theocracy of Euripidean drama dominated as it was by Zeus and his cohorts. In its place, through the characters of the women on stage, we can interpret the three aspects of the tripartite goddess: the Virgin, the Mother and the Crone.

In Barbara Walker's book *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Power*, she explains how the first and second stages of the pre-patriarchal goddess; the Virgin and the Mother are those aspects of the deity which could be transformed into a patriarchal theocracy and controlled by a male priesthood⁷ and certainly this was the practice when Euripides was writing.

In *Trojan Women* MacEwen demonstrates how essential it is to overthrow this priesthood. She depicts a Mother-figure,

Andromache, condemned for her self-obliterating virtue — and in doing so she shows the darker side of motherhood and of this aspect of the goddess too.

In a similar way she creates a Virgin, Cassandra, who moves beyond the control of the male theocracy (in this case the cult of Apollo) and enters instead into her own experience of sexuality. And MacEwen achieves this by transforming the 'sacred ecstasy' of the Virgin into the 'profane lust' of a woman awakened to her own needs — with the demarcation line between the sacred and the profane being totally eradicated in Cassandra's dance scene.

The transformation of Cassandra seems to take on aspects of 'jouissance' explained in Julia Kristeva's terms as "total joy or ecstasy (without any of the mystical connotations)"; it is a state that does not involve the Other as such.⁸

For Cassandra there is no 'other' during her dance; her sexual agency is palpable, she becomes the object of her own desire and physically and psychologically she achieves sexual autonomy. Just as Cassandra, traditional virgin of Apollo, moves away from the culturally constructed role and takes on aspects of the Whore, so too Hecuba moves from widow-Queen to Hag. And it is the transformation of Hecuba-into-Crone which is vital for the psychological movement of the play; her cross-over threatens the structure of patriarchy with fundamental change.

Barbara Walker's analysis centres on the Crone as the abandoning mother-figure who, in moving beyond male control, is the most feared (and fearsome) of all the archetypes.⁹

MacEwen's Hecuba may not be fearsome but she emerges as a fearless, powerful — woman whose degree of self-knowledge outweighs that of the other women. She recognizes the total dependency she had on her role as Queen/wife/mother:

*When my lord and sons were killed
I too was nothing.
It was as though I had never been.*

(p. 66)

During the play (and through her interaction with the other women) she assesses the cultural and religious taboos that have contained women. We see Hecuba move from piety to rebellion; in response to Helen's abduction, which precipitated the war, Hecuba calls down the gods:

*If this is how the gods work through
man, who needs the gods?*

(p. 73)

Hecuba locates the destruction inherent

in Helen's 'divine gift' of beauty, just as she locates the destruction of self implicit in Andromache's sexual compliance. Hecuba suggests that rather than 'faking it' Andromache should

*...lie there and pretend you are a rock.
Men find it humiliating trying to get
into a woman who's being a rock.*

(p. 68)

MacEwen's *Trojan Women* is a political analysis of the repression and control of women through their sexuality and she extends this into a polemic against war. It is the Cassandra-figure, in her new role as pragmatist and realist, who links these two concepts of sexuality, and horror to discover the locus of war:

*I am young. Life is short.
This war has shown me all I ever need
to see
Of the outcome of piety and honor,
the 'good' society...*

*I curse the smug self-righteous stones
Which are the foundation of this city!
I curse the smug, self-righteous rules
We were supposed to live by.
I curse these causes for a war.* (p. 45)

While it is Cassandra who defines 'these causes of war,' it is Hecuba who realizes the enormity of the deception created by war. 'Male-stream' history is:

*...all a web of lies
Where all the gore becomes glory
In the telling and re-telling
Of the lies... (p. 75)*

And it is through Hecuba that we learn the process of deconstructing history. We listen to her cajoling, berating, mocking these women who are waiting to hear the names of their new masters. Hecuba's rage pushes each woman to explore how she became trapped in the game of 'honour' that led to war. Finally the poetry moves beyond this small group to include all women who have been subjected to such treatment throughout history. The cost of war to women is made explicit in this play. Women were, and remain, one of the 'natural' prizes of battle; their bodies are part of the reward system contracted (and controlled) by 'heroic' men.

But MacEwen cuts the heroics constantly. Her control of language gives an immediacy to the dialogue; these Trojan women are also our contemporaries speaking directly, personally, to us. Cassandra knows that

*Absurd wars create absurd heroes...
There are no good guys and no bad
guys.*

Just all you silly little soldiers. (p. 47)

A similar reduction and negation is operating when Hecuba meets Menelaus and

sees

... what Helen's husband, the conqueror of Troy Really looks like. Now I know. You're smooth and round and Bald as a baby's bum. (p. 69)

It is through the use of irreverent, pithy, colloquialisms such as these that MacEwen closes the gap between the myth and the 'real' world we experience. The overall effect of the drama is to impart a sense of empowerment to the reader; she catches us up in the process of change and we begin to see bits of ourselves in these brave, angry — crazy — women on stage.

Trojan Women is a radical re-working of the old myth told with an honesty that cuts. But ultimately the play is philosophical; Hecuba, in her final set of questions to which she has no answers — reveals the enormity of the problem. "What were they all fighting for?"; "who can I blame, then — who can I blame?"

and the only reply possible is: "All of us — all of us" (p. 81). This brings the drama back full circle to the opening statement by Poseidon: "Family life in Troy was flawless... women learned to sew; men learned to kill."

MacEwen's adaptation provides no simple answers, but it asks all the important questions about the crippling effects of stereotyping. And in doing so it opens up a classical text in a new way.

¹ Gwendolyn MacEwen, *Trojan Women* (Scarborough: Exile Editions, 1981).

² Margaret Atwood, *Second Words* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), p. 67.

³ Jan Bartley, *Gwendolyn MacEwen and Her Works* (Toronto, ECW Press, n.

d.), p. 1.

⁴ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 256.

⁵ Carolyn Heilbrun, *Reinventing Womanhood* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1979), p. 154.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁷ Barbara G. Walker, *The Crone: Woman of Age, Wisdom and Power*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 131.

⁸ Julia Kristeva (ed. Leon S. Roudiez), *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), p. 16.

⁹ *The Crone...*, p. 184.

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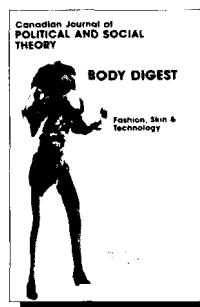
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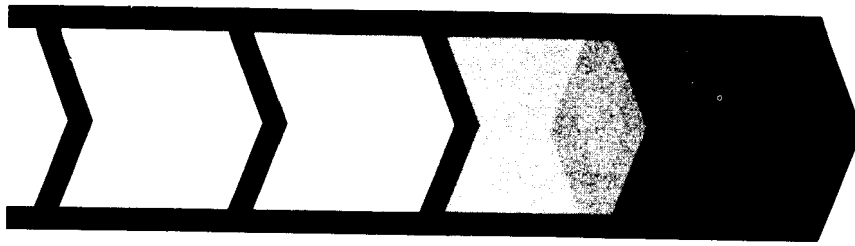
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