

Candidate 3 evidence

**To what degree can modern directors of Medea go against
a failed Bechdel test to re-incarnate it as a Feminist
production?**

"It was strange to think that all the great women of fiction were, until Jane Austen's day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of a woman's life is that." (Woolf: 1929).

Not only is this quote from the Virginia Woolf essay 'A Room of One's Own' a powerful demonstration of the lack of female representation in fiction, it also inspired Alison Bechdel in her creation of the 'Bechdel Test' in 1985 - a test that has since been used to detect every piece of film, media and text that holds bias against women. "Someone pointed out that the Test is really just a boiled down version of Chapter 5 of A Room of One's Own [...] I was so relieved to have someone make that connection." (Bechdel: 2013). To pass the Bechdel test, a piece of fiction must meet three simple requirements. One: there must be more than one female character. Two: these characters must talk to each other. Three: the topic of their conversation must not be a man. If it passes these requirements, it is often assumed to have fair and equal gender representation.

While the Bechdel test was designed to investigate how women are depicted in films, I will use it to analyse theatre performances to see what effect a director can have on the writing. I will compare two productions of the classic Greek tragedy Medea to see how the different directors have converted the original play- which is not at all feminist due to glorifying murder committed by women, female hysteria and manipulation, and a complete lack of rationality in Medea's character- into something feminist. I will also aim to explore if they have portrayed equal representation- whether the women are presented as independent figures without reference to a man. Finally, I will try to answer the question: can a theatre production be feminist without passing the Bechdel test? "Representation matters. Representation impacts people. Everyone deserves to have their story told." (Bakkenes: 2022).

"On the spectrum from empowered woman ahead of her time to ruthless and irrational murderess, as the general population's opinion on women has morphed throughout the years, so too has the image of Medea" (Nesselroad: 2018). Medea is a Greek play originally written by Euripides. While retold in many ways, the key storyline stays the same: Medea falls in love with a man called Jason and he convinces her to betray her family. She runs away with him, marries and has children, but then Jason leaves for another woman, leaving Medea alone in a foreign land. Her attempts to take revenge on Jason drive her insane, which, in the original and many other versions, causes her to kill her children.

Although the piece does not sound inherently feministic, it is the character of Medea that spreads a message of power for women. Yes, in many versions Medea's

power comes from her madness and crippling mental health issues. However, in modern remakes of Medea, the play often focuses on Medea as a powerful woman who uses her intelligence, pain and rage to destroy her manipulative husband. But, even when presenting Medea as a feminist figure, does the play pass the Bechdel test?

The first and main version of Medea I will examine is directed by Michael Boyd and written by Liz Lochhead. I watched this performance live at the EIF Hub in August 2022. This live performance meant I was able to see Medea as an actual person and experience the tense atmosphere created with her stage presence. Although this version presents the strong willed and independent character of Medea that Euripides created, in my opinion it does not pass the Bechdel test. One thing to note is that the Bechdel test was conceived to highlight the lack of female representation in the film industry but since then, society has tended to apply the test too literally. Using the more modern and literal interpretation of the Bechdel test, Medea technically passes as the requirements are met. However, I would argue that the third requirement (that the topic of two women's conversation must not be a man) is met on a technicality. This is because the only conversations Liz Lochhead wrote between Medea and other women not on the topic of a man, are about her children. I believe that the point of the Bechdel test was to bring more representation of women as independent individuals who are not just brought up in relation to a man. Here, Medea still only exists in her roles as a wife and a mother. "What they say of us is that we have a peaceful time. Living at home, while they do the fighting in war. How wrong they are! I would very much rather stand three times in the front of battle than bear one child." (Euripides: 431BC).

So, the Liz Lochhead text does not pass the Bechdel test. Does this mean the piece isn't feminist? I believe not. It is the clever writing of Liz Lochhead and the direction from Michael Boyd- of not only the character Medea but other female characters also- that, in my opinion, has provided this piece with more than equal representation and a portrayal of strong feminist ideas meaning it perfectly demonstrates the performance issue of feminism.

Take the example of Medea's conversations about her children. As mentioned, this technically passes the Bechdel test but limits Medea's representation as an individual. However, I believe Liz Lochhead is deliberately highlighting the idea that women in society are only considered important in the roles of mothers or wives. Medea is a symbol of women caged by the patriarchy. In my opinion, the writer has sacrificed female representation in the text to prove a point. It's easy to create a piece where the heroine is independent. Lochhead however, has created a piece where the main character is weighed down by societal expectations, ironically restricting Medea's self-identity to show how the other characters in the play and the whole of society force women to be. From this, I believe that Liz Lochhead is taking advantage of the Euripides ending where Medea kills her children to symbolise her rejecting the forced role of motherhood and reclaiming her identity as a woman.

One simple way the director made this piece feminist is that throughout the play, Medea goes to a group of women for comfort. I will be referring to them as the women's chorus. "It's a woman's play. In the end, and I think the men in it would

agree, the dominant voices of the play are Medea and the chorus. They are both funny, and angry, and hurt about their mistreatment by men." (Boyd: 2022). In my opinion, the women's chorus represent Medea's support system, symbolising the idea of women-supporting-women. They reflect the real-life idea that women should always be the protectors of other women and showed the bonds that women share due to relating to each other's bad treatment from men.

However, this group of women are not just Medea's friends. They are almost given the role of her disciples. In many scenes Boyd has directed the women- who usually stand upstage behind Medea or even amongst the audience below the raised traverse staging- to reach and grab Medea's hands and legs closing the proxemics to highlight how they praise and worship Medea as the feminist icon that they aspire too. The dialogue between Medea and the chorus may all be about Jason, but because of the way that Michael Boyd has directed the subtle movement of the group, their conversations convey a feminist feel. This is because they represent arguably the best part about womanhood, being supported by women who will listen to your pain and relate.

Michael Boyd reinforced this feeling by having the women's chorus move in unison around the performance space following Medea shadowing her powerful body language and posture. This allows the audience to see the metaphorical net of support and the idea that women unite to protect each other. I found that this related to the current 'Me too' movement where women all over the world have united to speak out against sexual violence as much like the movement, they spread an

important message about solidarity, especially with their chorus of confident voices. Even in the scenes where Medea and the chorus talk about men, Boyd's direction still gives strong representation of power and female bonds.

This clearly left an impact on the audience. One essay about female choruses in theatre noting the metaphor of womanhood in Medea's chorus with the quote "Lochhead's chorus and Medea possibly have nothing else in common besides their shared gender, yet this alone prompts them to immediately claim and advise her as their "sister", initially prioritizing womanhood alone, distinct from class or nationality, as sufficient to comprehend her grief." (Craig: 2015), showing just how well the director managed to create a feeling of connection between not only the chorus and Medea, but also between the chorus and the female members of the audience.

Boyd also created a sense of female power through the way he introduced the chorus. He placed them in the audience, unrecognisable as anything other than regular audience members and uses levels to introduce them to us. Suddenly, they appear standing on blocks and speaking to Medea who is on the traverse staging. I found that getting the women to stand on blocks when they had previously been just another watcher symbolised the idea of women standing up in society. The overpowering loud volume of their voices with tones of desperation reflects the societal idea that women are constantly having to speak out to defend other women against the actions of men. This then supports the idea that even a theatre piece that does not pass the Bechdel test can be feminist as while the chorus and Medea often talk about men, they are really talking about how Medea can gain power over a man. "If we want to successfully dismantle the systems that oppress us all, it will take the collective efforts of everyone to reach transformative change. There is

undeniable power in female solidarity, and even more strength we have yet to realise." (Couloute: 2021).

The use of costume design was another important way of conveying feminist ideas. Medea, played by Adura Onashile, was directed to wear a long black dress and big gold hoop earrings. While simple, this outfit was highly effective. The gold earrings symbolised the idea of royalty and high status and were impossible to miss, especially with Onashile's short haircut exaggerated by her cat like posture with over stretched neck. Boyd directed Medea use sharp head movements causing the earrings to shine under the warm floodlights- the lights themselves being a nod to royalty or godliness with their golden intensity. To me, this showed that Medea sees herself as a powerful figure- she believes she has control and uses this belief in her favour. Then, we look at the dress. In my opinion, ultimately the black colour represented the death of Medea and Jason's relationship and helped to portray Medea as a woman who strives for domination over men however, it shows that her character is also bold and angry. The extreme low cut of the dress suggests that Medea controls her sexuality and is not afraid to be sexual. Medea knows her worth- she aims to seduce but is in full control of her body and who looks at it. Most importantly, the dress presented the idea of female rage. I believe that it perfectly reflected a real-life moment where Princess Diana wore a tight black dress to a dinner after discovering her husband's affair. I believe Boyd wanted to create a feeling of vengefulness yet Medea's relatable to the women of the contemporary audience.

I found that this costume suggests that Medea is like a Goddess- beautiful and powerful, and she knows that she is in charge. This represented not only female independence but also helped the audience to see women as not hysterical and fragile beings, but as individuals with dominion over their own lives and self-worth that doesn't depend on affirmation from men. Michael Boyd has aimed to properly represent woman as powerful and self-reliant figures giving this piece its feminist edge. "There has been a lot of discussion about roles for women in British theatre and how inadequate it is, and I agree it is. It's still a very sexist world, including in the theatre." (Boyd: 2012)

Michael Boyd's inspired outfit choice strongly differ from other versions of Medea- one of which was written by Ben Power and directed by Carrie Cracknell. This version of Medea also did not pass the Bechdel test but still spread some feminist ideas. Where Boyd chose a striking and intense outfit for Medea, Cracknell chose to highlight the idea of declining mental health by having Medea- played by Helen McCrory- dress in an old dirt stained vest top and baggy, raggedy trousers. While not having the same power as Onashile's costume, this outfit allowed the audience to think of Medea as a real, struggling, person. This Medea is someone relatable- a woman who has been wronged by a man. Then, the director surprises us towards the end of the play by putting Medea in a flowing, white jumpsuit. In my opinion, this holy white colour, like Onashile's black dress, presents Medea as a Goddess- a powerful icon with full control.

I also admired how Medea was given the colour white, a common symbol of innocence and purity for women, only to have the jumpsuit be covered in dirt and most importantly, blood. The sight of it shockingly splattered with the blood of her children was symbolic of Medea rejecting the rules that society have created about women. She is not fragile or innocent and won't allow her life to be ruled by men. Another clever costume choice was the white, floral dresses of the chorus. The colour white is often used to symbolise the Suffrage movement with many women wearing the colour in feminist solidarity. "Women have turned to wearing white as a symbol of sisterhood and solidarity, reflecting the progress made by those who fought for women's suffrage in the decades before them." (Unknown: 2021). Even if unintentional, this helped to convey the same point Michael Boyd made- women need to stand together and fight for change. "It reminds me of a revolution. In a revolution, you have to get everyone on board, as Medea does with the chorus, and then in revolutions there is sacrifice and, in this case, the sacrifice of the children" (Onashile: 2022).

Looking more in depth at Medea being covered in her children's blood, I found it interesting that unlike the Michael Boyd version, Carrie Cracknell and Ben Power chose to follow Euripides and have both children be boys. Medea kills both of her sons- but why? The general theory is that Medea kills them to take revenge on Jason, to take away what means most to him so that he can feel her pain. However, I believe that Medea kills her sons to save them from the curse of being men. They won't have to gain the despicable characteristics she sees in most men. One line from the play spoken by the children's nurse backs up this perspective- "she can't bear to see her sons, the product of their father" (Power: 2014). This shows that the

boys remind Medea of the man who wronged her, she cannot see them without feeling the pain Jason has caused.

I found this also related to the current idea of "kill all men", a phrase that became popular amongst women in early 2022. Like these women, Medea is owning her rage, allowing the audience to see her as a dynamic and dominant individual. This helps to demonstrate the performance issue of feminism as it shows how women are beginning to reject their forced roles to finally be respected as individuals in society. Some may argue that this presentation of feminism shames women who enjoy being in the role of a housewife or mother. However, I believe Cracknell wanted to show that women can and will rebel against their society-assigned positions. She is highlighting the idea that feminism is about women breaking down the barriers created by men- something Medea has done in all versions, even if not necessarily in a positive way.

Looking back to the Michael Boyd version, I think what strangely added to the feminist nature of the play was the direction during the last scene in which Medea kills her children. The scene is incredibly impactful with Medea taking her children into the house, which was a small door upstage and silently killing them. Boyd then had Medea walk back slowly, almost dragging her own body, onto centre stage covered with blood. As she raised her eyes slowly whilst gazing at them with a facial expression of disbelief and despair, I found that this image was an amazing representation of female mania and declining mental health. The result of that decline is rarely forced upon the audience in such a graphic manner. In my opinion,

this reflected the same ideas as the book *Carrie* by Stephen King in which a girl with supernatural abilities is brought on stage at her school prom by bullies and is covered with pig's blood. This causes her to kill her classmates, covering herself with more blood. I believe that much like the book *Carrie*, Boyd's idea was to display how female rage can be deadly. Even though the scene was about how unstable Medea had become, the transparency and vulnerability of the character we saw on stage ensured that female mania would be taken seriously. The scene felt like a threat to the audience about the true violence women are capable of if we continue to be abused by men. It helped to represent Medea as not a delicate, sensitive woman, but as someone who will use her anger to fulfil her desire for revenge. "Euripides wrote this play with such passionate arguments for a woman, with sympathy for her as well as fear of her." (Lochead: 2022).

In conclusion, I believe that while not passing the literal interpretation of the Bechdel test, both versions of *Medea* achieve what Alison Bechdel really wanted - representation of women. For Michael Boyd and Liz Lochead's version, I believe while the script of *Medea* lacks the requirement that 'proves' this production contains female representation, Michael Boyd has perfectly managed to provide representation not only of independent women but of their relationships with other women, their capabilities and their power. I believe Boyd has answered the question 'can a theatre production be feminist without passing the Bechdel test?' with a resounding yes. Boyd has created a feminist piece through the direction of the interactions between the women's chorus and Medea and also through the costume design for Medea creating an idea of female domination and the serious and accurate representation of mania in women. For Carrie Cracknell and Ben Powers

version, I believe that despite not having as many feminist ideas as Boyd, they have used costume and connections to the Euripides piece to spread strong symbolism about women breaking the chains placed on them by society. They have shown that women have the strength, vengefulness and rage to overcome abuse from men.

"[This play is] incredibly intimate and awful, but it also epic and empowering. Those feel like contradictions, but they are all in the play, and I think that is why it will always endure." (Onashile: 2022)

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