

## CHAPTER 8



# John McNaughton's *Wild Things*: Pop Culture Echoes of Medea in the 1990s

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Whether or not we have encountered the myths or theatrical performances of the Greeks and Romans, the spectre of Medea has confronted us. Medea's destruction of human life, including siblings, kings and even children from her own womb, simultaneously horrifies and fascinates us. The fascination with the real Medeas of the evening-news telecasts is mirrored in the allure of the fictional Medeas of our commercial movies. However, scholars daring to connect popular culture and the classics sometimes risk falling under their colleagues' scornful gaze. In recent years, some have fought back against such scholarly opposition. Maria Wyke argues:

Incorporating feature films [...] into classical course offerings need not represent a 'selling out' to the lowest common denominator or a trivialization of the tradition of Western culture; rather it is an effective means to make antiquity more readily accessible and to throw light on our own age as well.<sup>1</sup>

Over the past two decades, articles and books by classical scholars such as Monica Cyrino,<sup>2</sup> Marianne McDonald,<sup>3</sup> Jon Solomon,<sup>4</sup> Martin Winkler,<sup>5</sup> Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh<sup>6</sup> amongst others have also paved the way for further connections between popular culture and the classics.

The subject of this chapter, John McNaughton's 1998 movie *Wild Things*,<sup>7</sup> is, in respect to artistic merit, a far cry from Pasolini, Cacoyannis or even Woody Allen, all of whose modern works have been deemed worthy of comparison with classical dramas. Roger Ebert, film critic for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, describes *Wild Things* as being 'like a three-way collision between a softcore sex film, a soap opera and a B-grade noir'.<sup>8</sup> For Janet Maslin of the *New York Times*, *Wild Things* is '[p]redicated on two ideas — that human nature is rife with perfidy and that it's important to get the cast into hot cars or bathing suits whenever possible'.<sup>9</sup> The criticism by Ebert and Maslin is typical of reactions to this movie and thus misses its clear debt to Euripides, who brought plays to the Athenian stage in the last half of the fifth century BC. Moreover, McNaughton's movie contains a deliberate and uncontested representation of not only a modern-day Medea ('Suzie Toller', played by Neve Campbell) but also a Phaedra-figure ('Kelly Van Ryan', played by Denise Richards) and a Jason/Hippolytus-figure ('Sam Lombardo', played by Matt Dillon). Although this analysis does not suggest that McNaughton's *Wild Things* possesses an artistry that would make it worthy of the label 'film', *Wild Things* offers

an audience far more than sun, sea and skin. Accordingly, just as Greek tragedians would follow their three tragedies with a satyr play, these remarks are offered as a sort of satyr paper which may contrast with the grim pathos that Medea usually evokes. Indeed, a lighter portrayal of Medea is not discordant with the *mos maiorum*, as at least eight classical playwrights wrote comedies entitled *Medea*.<sup>10</sup>

As indicated by the comments of Ebert and Maslin, movie-patrons will have gone to see director John McNaughton's *Wild Things* for its aesthetically pleasing leading actors, especially Neve Campbell, Matt Dillon and Denise Richards. This movie's most under-appreciated element is screenwriter Stephen Peters's obvious debt to classical mythology, tragedy and, especially, two Euripidean plays, *Medea* (431 BC) and *Hippolytus* (428 BC). Because *Wild Things*, at one hundred and fifteen minutes, is too long to show in a single class and because it combines two Euripidean plays, it is this author's practice to offer students the opportunity to write a two-thousand-word essay comparing and contrasting the movie with Euripides' plays. Most often, however, students are shown the movie's penultimate scene, which contains direct references and allusions to the Medea, and asked to write a one-page, in-class essay in which they compare and contrast the movie's Medea with the Euripidean Medea. Such assignments are intended to help the students to recognize detailed similarities between the respective plots, the movie's characters and the play's characters (especially how Suzie Toller compares with Medea and how Sam Lombardo compares with Jason), as well as the debt that modern movies owe to the classical tradition.

Upon an initial viewing of *Wild Things*, students of classical drama will recall *Hippolytus* on account of the false accusation of rape dominating the first half of the movie. Because its penultimate scene refers directly to Euripides' *Medea*, a re-examination of *Wild Things* for additional classical influence is in order. A careful viewing brings to light further elements from classical mythology in general and Euripidean drama in particular, such as aspects of characterization, a diptychous plot, a trial scene, instances of violence hidden from the audience's view and the intrusion of a comic character upon serious events. Additionally, *Wild Things* invites a meta-theatrical approach in which the audience can view the Medea-figure (Neve Campbell), the Phaedra-figure (Denise Richards) and the Hippolytus/Jason-figure (Matt Dillon) as rival filmmakers struggling for control of the movie's plot.

Given this introduction, let us now examine the movie in a linear fashion and point out the resemblances between *Wild Things* and the two Euripidean plays. As with the coastal settings of Corinth and Troezen in Euripides' *Medea* and *Hippolytus*, *Wild Things* has the littoral locale of Blue Bay, Florida. In Scene 1 Sam Lombardo, the Hippolytus/Jason figure, zips through the Florida Everglades in a fan boat. In our first glimpse of Lombardo, the local high school's award-winning guidance counsellor, he is alone and in the wilds, like Hippolytus, who spends much of his time hunting in the forests and meadows of Troezen. Lombardo's cruising through the marshes in his fan boat may also allude to the *Hippolytus*, where the noun *limnē*, which can mean 'marshy lake', occurs four times (ll. 149, 228, 744, 1132). The last of these passages refers to the exiled Hippolytus, whom the women of Troezen are lamenting. Philip Vellacott translates lines 1131–33 as follows:

No more will you mount, Hippolytus,  
 Behind your yoked Thessalian team  
 Holding the track round the shore-marshes [*Limnas*]  
 With the tense drumming of hooves.<sup>11</sup>

Lombardo initially resembles Hippolytus but also possesses characteristics reminiscent of Jason, who sailed the *Argo* in his search for the Golden Fleece. Besides serving as a guidance counsellor, Lombardo coaches the school's sailing team. He may drive a fan boat in the movie's opening, but in Scene 2 he speaks admiringly of and gazes covetously at a magnificent sailboat passing in the bay, which foreshadows a similar vessel whose helm he will take at the movie's conclusion.

After school one day Lombardo gives two students a ride home. One, Kelly Van Ryan, is the daughter of wealthy socialite Sandra Van Ryan (played by Theresa Russell), who bears a slight resemblance to Pasiphae, the wife of King Minos of Crete. Pasiphae's lust led her to have sexual intercourse with a bull and thus give birth to the Minotaur. Sandra, whose husband has recently committed suicide, has a very active libido. In Scene 5 the audience witnesses mother Van Ryan having sexual relations with a muscle-bound young man. When Lombardo delivers Kelly to the Van Ryan mansion, the façade of the two-storey house, with its single door on each storey, recalls the *scaenae frons* of a Hellenistic theatre. After watching the entire movie the classically trained viewer will realize that this is one of the production's hints at discourse with the ancient theatre.

As Kelly exits from Lombardo's Jeep, mother Sandra, dressed in a gauzy robe and a bikini, stands upon the second-storey balcony. She invites Lombardo to stop by some time for a drink but he ignores her invitation. Kelly gives her mother a dirty look before she and her mother simultaneously enter the house, the daughter through the lower-level door, the mother through the second-storey door. This deliberately simultaneous entry into the house of mother (above) and daughter (below) adds to the theatrical feel of the movie. It also hints at the struggle for power between Kelly and her mother. At the first stage of the movie, the mother is above and in a dominant position; later, as we shall see, Kelly gains power over her mother.

Whereas later in the movie we learn that Lombardo and mother Sandra have had a sexual relationship, in this third scene Lombardo, unmarried and immune to sexual temptation, looks like Hippolytus, devotee of the goddess Artemis and therefore also devoted to chastity. In Scene 5 his Jasonian aspect reappears. Not only is Lombardo an expert sailor: like Euripides' Jason he is also a social climber. In Euripides' *Medea* Jason divorced his barbarian wife Medea to marry the Greek daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. Because Creon had no sons, Jason would presumably be in line for the throne. Like Jason, Lombardo is dating a young socialite, Barbara Baxter, the daughter of powerful local attorney Tom Baxter. This relationship is soon shattered when Kelly Van Ryan and another female friend visit Lombardo at his house as part of a school fund-raising event. At this point, Kelly's Phaedra aspect begins to emerge. Just as Phaedra attempted to seduce her stepson Hippolytus, Kelly, before the visit concludes and with a seductive gleam in her eye, tells her female friend to leave. Kelly then enters Lombardo's house with

the apparent intent of seducing him. As for the subsequent events, in keeping with the practice of ancient tragedy, in which acts of violence took place off-stage and would subsequently be reported through a messenger, we are not allowed to view Kelly's encounter with Lombardo. Next the audience sees Kelly, with her shirt torn, emerge from Lombardo's house.

In Scene 6 Kelly functions as the messenger, telling her mother that Lombardo has sexually assaulted her. In Euripides' play the audience, knowing the mythic tradition, was aware that Phaedra's accusation of Hippolytus was false. The customary practice of modern movies, however, is to keep the audience in suspense. At this point the moviegoer does not know whether Kelly is telling the truth. The movie's audience does know that Lombardo does not completely resemble the virginal Hippolytus (he is dating Tom Baxter's daughter and has a sexually tense relationship with Kelly's mother) but at this point they are not aware that Lombardo has a much darker side. Kelly's accusation in the *oikos* is followed by an accusation in the *polis*: Kelly makes the same claim before the local police. Detective Ray Duquette (played by Kevin Bacon), hearing Kelly's statement, thinks Kelly is telling the truth, but Detective Gloria Perez, in a deliberately meta-theatrical statement, opines: 'I think she's acting'. Because Kelly comes from a powerful family, however, the police are reluctant to question her claims. Whereas investigators like Ray Duquette, Gloria Perez and various members of the police force do not have any specific analogue in classical mythology, their evaluative statements and actions cause them to resemble a sort of chorus, commenting upon and attempting to understand the actions of Kelly at this point, but later those of Lombardo and Suzie. Duquette's, Perez's and the police force's lack of explicit classical analogue is not terribly significant. If every character in the play were to have an ancient counterpart, *Wild Things* would veer out of the realm of popular entertainment and more toward the realm of 'film'. The classical motifs are the screenwriter's attempt to add an element of erudition to a movie resting squarely in the genre of murder/mystery or crime thriller.

As with Hippolytus, an accusation of rape causes Lombardo's exile from the community. Thanks to Sandra Van Ryan's influence the school board suspends Lombardo from his job. Thus, when he goes to the local yacht club to meet Barbara Baxter for lunch, her father intercepts Lombardo, tells him that he is 'finished in Blue Bay' and threatens to kill him if he has any contact with his daughter. Thus, Tom Baxter functions as a substitute for the Euripidean Theseus, who, believing that Hippolytus had raped his wife Phaedra, put a curse upon Hippolytus (which ultimately led to his death) and sent him into exile.

Besides his Hippolytus-like exile, Lombardo's character continues along that character's trajectory. After Hippolytus is exiled from Troezen, he drives his chariot away from the town. The young man is thrown from his chariot and dragged almost to death when a bull roars out of the sea and terrifies his horses. Similarly, Sandra Van Ryan's muscular boyfriend runs Lombardo's jeep off the road and into the swamp. When a dazed Lombardo crawls from the vehicle, Sandra's boyfriend physically assaults him. Unlike Euripides' Hippolytus, whose chariot accident eventually results in his death, Lombardo does not perish. Like the Hippolytus of the Ovidian tradition (*Metamorphoses* 15.479–546), Lombardo experiences a

figurative resurrection as he rises from the waters of the swamp. Unfortunately for Lombardo, this rebirth will be followed by his trial.

Although accused of rape, Lombardo has not been arrested because no physical evidence of the crime exists. When another student, Suzie Toller,<sup>12</sup> also accuses Lombardo of assaulting her sexually, Lombardo is arrested and put on trial. Unlike Lombardo, Hippolytus was not tried for rape; however, mythical precedent does exist for a rape trial: in *Electra* Euripides mentions the case of Ares, who stood trial in Athens for killing Halirrhothius because the latter had raped Ares's daughter Alcippe (ll. 1258–63). Although one wonders whether our screenwriter knew of Halirrhothius's crime and the subsequent trial of Ares, the classically educated viewer may detect an element of the better-known Orestes saga in Lombardo's trial. Given the classical elements elsewhere in the movie, we are not surprised to find a female judge presiding over Lombardo's trial. In Aeschylus's *Eumenides*, Athena, goddess of wisdom and war (a male-dominated realm), presides over the trial of Orestes. In *Wild Things* this female arbiter, like Athena, has a masculine aspect, as indicated by her family name: Wexman. Although Judge Wexman speaks few lines, she does exercise Athena-like control over the trial's two witnesses, Kelly Van Ryan and Suzie Toller, the male prosecutor, the male defence attorney and another male lawyer who attempts (and fails due to Wexman's assertion of her authority) to make himself heard during the proceedings.

The trial scene in *Wild Things* also adds an unexpectedly comic element. Just as Euripides occasionally inserts a humorous scene or character into his tragedies (e.g. the Phrygian messenger in *Orestes* or the aged Cadmus and blind prophet Teiresias preparing to worship Dionysus in *Bacchae*), in *Wild Things* an 'ambulance-chasing', neck-brace-wearing attorney named Kenneth Bowden represents Lombardo. This role is played by veteran comic actor Bill Murray. Despite Murray's highly clichéd exterior, which leads the audience to think Lombardo has no hope of success, he is a skilful attorney and obtains Lombardo's acquittal when Suzie Toller testifies that Kelly Van Ryan persuaded her to corroborate her accusation of rape because, according to Toller, Lombardo had spurned Kelly. Thus, the movie's first half, indebted to *Hippolytus*, ends with Lombardo being acquitted of rape and then successfully suing the Van Ryans for defamation of character.

In the movie's opening half Kelly/Phaedra appears as a figurative director who, because unable to control her character (Suzie Toller), fails to convince her audience. We soon come to believe, though, that Lombardo is the movie's interior director, since in Scene 15, set at Lombardo's hotel room on the outskirts of town, we find that Lombardo's role as Hippolytus has been a sham: he appears to have directed both Kelly Van Ryan and Suzie Toller in a plot to defraud Sandra Van Ryan out of millions of dollars. Not only are these three linked criminally, they are also linked romantically. In this scene Lombardo directs Kelly and Suzie to kiss and then engages with them in a *ménage à trois*, an act that has no parallel in the mythic tradition but which is used most likely to titillate modern viewers. As for the meta-theatricality, this continues the earlier meta-theatrical motif seen when the police speculate on whether Kelly is telling the truth about being raped. Additionally, the movie's meta-theatrical moments recall a not uncommon practice in classical drama

in which, for example, one character pretends to be someone else (e.g. Orestes pretending to be a messenger reporting the death of Orestes in Aeschylus's *Libation Bearers*) or one character directs another to engage in a certain activity (Dionysus having King Pentheus dress as a woman in Euripides' *Bacchae*). Also, at the time *Wild Things* was produced, the meta-theatrical approach to reading literature was becoming popular among scholars in the Humanities.<sup>13</sup> In *The Seal of Orestes* Ann Batchelder describes how, at the conclusion of Sophocles' *Electra*, Aegisthus and Orestes struggle for 'control of the stage'.<sup>14</sup> A comparable phenomenon occurs in *Wild Things* as Kelly, Lombardo and (as we shall see later) Suzie Toller struggle to gain control of the movie's plot by controlling the other characters.

When the police begin to suspect their criminal conspiracy, the female conspirators succumb, or at least so it appears initially, to paranoia, greed and jealousy. In Scene 19 Kelly takes a distraught and intoxicated Suzie Toller to the beach for a late-night meeting with Lombardo. After Lombardo sends Kelly to her car to fetch a blanket, he apparently kills Toller. In keeping with classical Greek stage practice, the movie's audience does not see the violence but only witness Kelly's reaction to Toller's screams. To the audience, however, Toller must be dead: we see Lombardo and Kelly put her body, wrapped in plastic, in the back of Kelly's SUV. In the next scene Detective Duquette finds bloodstains and human teeth on the beach. Unlike Euripides' Jason, whose princess (Creon's daughter) is killed by Medea, Lombardo has apparently rid himself of his Medea and will now enjoy his 'princess', which, interestingly, is a label applied to Kelly a few scenes earlier (by the character Tom Baxter after the trial scene).

The movie's Jason will not enjoy his 'princess' for long, however, as Kelly soon meets her demise when Detective Duquette, for reasons not yet apparent, goes to the Van Ryan mansion. Again, after the manner of Greek tragedy, audience members do not see what happens inside the house, but a struggle and the sound of gunfire are heard. We do see a wounded Duquette crawl from the mansion, while Sandra Van Ryan enters the house through the same door and apparently finds her daughter dead. In a subsequent messenger speech Duquette himself explains how Kelly died. Despite Duquette's claim that he killed Kelly when she drew a gun upon him, the police department's internal affairs division determines that Duquette has acted improperly and terminate his employment. This panel also concludes that Kelly Van Ryan killed Suzie Toller.

With Suzie and Kelly dead, apparently only Lombardo will enjoy the money from the conspiracy. Scene 24 begins with Lombardo alone on an unnamed Caribbean beach.<sup>15</sup> Upon returning to his cabana he finds Duquette, whom he identifies as his partner in the conspiracy. Now it appears that Duquette and Lombardo will share the money. Earlier in the movie Duquette was cast as a sort of choral figure, a representative of society trying to understand Lombardo's actions. Now we find Duquette cast in a mythical role, albeit one from modern American myth: he is the corrupt police officer.

Next, we see Duquette and Lombardo on the latter's new sailboat. As the two men sail along, Jason/Lombardo teaches Duquette how to tie the boat's rigging but in doing so attempts to throw him overboard. In the ensuing struggle Duquette is

about to kill Lombardo but suddenly an arrow from an unseen assailant's spear gun strikes Duquette in the leg. He glances up, sees his assailant and cries out, 'You, you're dead'. There stands Suzie Toller, who, after the fashion of Medea killing the aged ram and then conjuring up a new lamb in its place, has resurrected herself. Our modern Medea then shoots Duquette with a second arrow, which sends him tumbling from the ship to his doom. Thus, in this scene Duquette may serve as the movie's Absyrtus figure. In the mythical tradition followed by Euripides, Medea, as she and Jason were sailing from Colchis and being pursued by her father in another ship, had cut up her brother Absyrtus and thrown his body parts into the sea so that her father would stop, collect the pieces and provide burial for his son. In the movie such brutal grotesqueness has no place, nor would it be logical or fit in with the tone of the rest of the movie. *Wild Things* is a murder/mystery or crime thriller, not a 'slasher' movie.

Toller, now alone on the boat with Lombardo, has no intention of sharing the money. In Euripides' *Medea*, Medea's poison kills Creon's daughter and the king. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Medea persuades Aegeus to give his son Theseus some poisoned wine. Toller, unseen by the audience,<sup>16</sup> has poisoned Lombardo's drink. Moreover, just as the Euripidean Medea uses supplication to achieve her evil aims (e.g. she begs King Creon to delay his exile of her, which allows her to carry out her plot of killing Creon's daughter), Toller, initially feigning friendliness towards the seated Lombardo, kneels before him and hands him a drink. Unlike Theseus, Lombardo will consume the poison. As Lombardo quaffs his drink our modern Medea asks him, 'Before sailing away on the *Helios*, Medea killed King Creon and the princess with what: a rock, a spear gun, or a little poison?'. Not only does Toller poison Lombardo's drink: in a further allusion to the Medea myth she then releases the ship's yard arm, which crashes into Lombardo's head and sends him hurtling overboard to his death. This recalls the conclusion of Euripides' *Medea*, when the title character predicts that Jason's death will occur when a beam from the Argo crushes his head (*Medea*, ll. 1386–87). In Euripides' play, after her crimes Medea flies away from Corinth in the chariot of her grandfather Helios (*Medea*, l. 1321). Our Medea employs Lombardo's sailboat as a substitute. Furthermore, a slow and deliberate camera shot of the prow of Lombardo's ship identifies the vessel as the *Helios*, whose helm Toller now takes and on which she sails away. When Toller reaches shore Lombardo's attorney, Kenneth Bowden, meets her and gives her the money from the lawsuit. The encounter lasts just a few seconds and provides no additional insight as to his character; however, just as Medea, after committing horrific murders, escapes from Corinth and takes up residence with the King of Athens, Suzie, with a briefcase full of money and the promise of more already stashed away in a bank account, walks away toward the beach. As a criminal, of course, Suzie cannot return to the United States; however, her ultimate residence in the light of the Caribbean contrasts with the dark of her home in the swamp and marks the beginning of her transition from an impoverished liminality to a lifestyle enjoyed by the glitterati.

As the movie concludes we now understand that Toller, rather than Kelly or Lombardo, has served as the movie's interior director. Although the movie's

penultimate scene clearly identifies Toller as the Medea-figure, the screenwriter has provided a few subtle hints of this earlier in the movie. Like Medea, who, as a barbarian female, would be both ethnically and socially 'Other' to Greek males, Toller's 'Otherness' is also manifest but primarily with respect to social status from a modern American perspective. For example, she does not behave or dress like the other 'preppie' students at her school. In contrast to the fair-skinned, blonde, mansion-dwelling Kelly Van Ryan, this tattooed teenager with the two-toned hair (red and black)<sup>17</sup> lives in a mobile-home trailer in the swamp on the outskirts of town. In Scene 2 we learn that Detective Duquette once arrested Suzie for possession of marijuana; in Scene 3 her ingenuity is displayed when we see her successfully repairing her dilapidated Volkswagen Beetle on the roadside.

Unlike the Euripidean practice of an expository prologue in which the family history of the characters and other background material are set forth, in *Wild Things* these details are provided during the final scene and during the movie's credits, which show some of the violence and other background details omitted from the body of the movie. Both the final and omitted scenes add an intelligence and skilfulness to Toller's biography that recall elements of the Medea myth: Toller was an avid sailor and had once achieved an IQ score of almost two hundred. We also learn that she was blackmailing Lombardo. Having discovered Lombardo's affair with Kelly, Toller had instructed him to enlist Duquette's aid in their conspiracy. The audience also sees how Toller faked her own death. This confirmation of Toller's intelligence, which has been hinted at from early on in the movie, provides a further link with Medea, who, like Toller, manipulates and outwits the men (especially Creon and Jason), brings about their death or ruin and escapes from Corinth unscathed. Because Medea's magically being whisked away from Corinth in the serpent-drawn chariot of Helios has no place in the motion picture, Toller is provided with the intelligence and skill required to pilot the sailboat.

Other elements of Toller's both Medean and tragic character emerge in the final scene, in which we find an elderly woman, Ruby (played by Carrie Snodgrass), conversing with Detective Perez, who continues to investigate the case. Here, Ruby provides an epilogue that replaces the Euripidean expository prologue, a convention rarely used in modern movies and inappropriate for a murder/mystery. In Euripidean prologues a single character would provide details about events leading up to the current situation as well as details about the familial relationships of some of the characters whom the audience would soon see. In *Wild Things* Ruby's epilogue provides this background. Also striking is Ruby's relationship to Suzie. In the Euripidean *Medea* the title character's elderly Nurse delivers the expository prologue. In the movie we see that Ruby functioned as Suzie's nurse: she raised Suzie and calls herself Suzie's grandmother. She further relates that neither of Suzie's parents is alive. Earlier in the movie the audience learns that Mr. Van Ryan had committed suicide (a common form of death in Greek tragedy; cf. Phaedra in the *Hippolytus*). Ruby also informs the detective that Suzie's mother 'drank herself to death'. The lack of parental presence for Suzie adds another similarity between her and both Medea and Phaedra, neither of whom can avail themselves of parental aid in their respective plays. Still, Toller's tragic background is even more complicated

than that of Medea or Phaedra due to the fact that, as Ruby notes, Suzie was the illegitimate child of Sandra Van Ryan's husband and an unnamed trollop whom Mr. Van Ryan had 'picked up somewhere', impregnated and 'dumped in the swamp'. Thus, just as Jason sailed away with Medea from her native land of Colchis and later divorced her in a city foreign to her, Suzie's mother had been treated in an analogous fashion by Mr Van Ryan. Just as Medea would have been regarded as a foreigner by Greeks, Suzie's upbringing in a mobile-home trailer in the swamp marks her as a liminal character on the fringes of Blue Bay's 'blue-blooded' society.

Ruby further declares that Suzie and Sandra Van Ryan were half-sisters, which makes Kelly Suzie's niece, a fact introduced not only to provide perverse titillation for the audience (given Suzie and Kelly's sexual relationship) but also, this author would suggest, meant to add a further classical dimension to her character, given that incestuous relationships (albeit not between two females) are not unknown in Greek mythology (e.g. Oedipus). The familial link between Kelly and Suzie may be an extra adaptation and modification of the mythic tradition: Theseus had been the husband of Ariadne and Phaedra, both daughters of Minos, whereas Lombardo is the lover of both Kelly and Suzie. So, whereas the family history of Suzie Toller, the daughter of a wealthy man and a woman of unknown lineage, matches Medea's noble parentage in part, the movie makes Suzie's family background far more complex than that of Medea.

Thus, as we have shown, a close viewing of *Wild Things* reveals manifest influence from classical mythology and Euripidean tragedy. Although one suspects classical influence after Kelly Van Ryan's false accusation of rape, this suspicion is confirmed in the final scenes involving Duquette, Lombardo, and Toller, who clearly identifies herself as a modern Medea. Unlike her ancient counterpart, Toller does not kill her children; but such brutality has no place in a movie populated by such aesthetically pleasing actors. If Toller's own rejection by her father factors into her quest for financial gain, this does not emerge during the course of the movie. Money, pure and simple, motivates the characters in *Wild Things*, and any complex psychological explanations for their greed are left unexplored.

Our primary aim in examining McNaughton's movie has been to create awareness of this Medea so that other teachers might consider using it as an entry to classroom discussions of Euripides' (or even Seneca's) *Medea*. An additional intention was to draw attention to a movie that most critics noticed only for its sexuality. *Wild Things* deliberately interweaves elements of *Medea* and *Hippolytus* to create a crime/thriller that leaves the audience continually guessing who is manipulating whom. Unlike the Euripidean Medea, only at the conclusion of *Wild Things* do we realize that Suzie Toller has been the controlling force, the movie's meta-theatrical director, behind the plot to cheat the Van Ryans out of millions of dollars. The movie's Medea, rather than becoming a filicide, has been transformed into a woman whose magic is her intelligence and willingness to use her sexuality to seduce adversaries of both genders. Although the movie's employment of elements from Euripides' *Medea* and *Hippolytus* is impressive — especially in light of the movie's low-brow façade — the introduction of the lesbian motif between Suzie and Kelly and a brief homoerotic tension between Lombardo and Duquette in Scene 24 are

likely gratuitous and perhaps based on the misguided notion that the ancient Greeks were all homosexuals.

In contrast to Suzie's Euripidean counterpart, whose killing of her children is motivated by 'sexual jealousy', her 'strong will, unchecked emotion, and anger' and 'issues of status, reputation, and fame',<sup>18</sup> the primary motivation for the crimes committed by McNaughton's Medea-figure is money. Suzie Toller does exhibit some sexual jealousy toward her female rival, Kelly Van Ryan, but is only remotely connected to Kelly's death. Suzie's destruction of Duquette does have some basis in justice/retribution — Duquette had arrested Suzie for possession of drugs and killed one of Suzie's friends — but these motives are introduced very briefly and suddenly during the movie. The viewer may have forgotten these details by the time Suzie kills Duquette, an act which also saves Lombardo from Duquette. More significantly, Suzie will not have wanted Duquette to share the money, a motivation that also drives her to kill Lombardo. Although Toller's lust for financial gain does recall Eriphyle (cf. Pausanias 9.41.2–5), who betrayed her husband for a valuable necklace, crimes motivated by financial gain are more likely to appear in modern movies than on ancient Greek stages or in the pages of Greek mythographers.

Aristotle observes in the *Poetics* that 'everyone delights in representations' (1448b9) and, indeed, anyone might delight in the characters and actions represented in *Wild Things*. Students are surprised when first told of the Euripidean influence upon the movie. After watching the scene in which Suzie Toller quizzes Sam Lombardo about the Medea and being shown that the name of the sailboat is the *Helios*, they quickly become convinced and begin to look carefully at the whole of the movie for other classical echoes. Thus, students of the classical tradition will enjoy greater challenges than other viewers as they try to determine whether Lombardo ultimately represents Jason or Hippolytus; whether Kelly's Phaedra will triumph over Lombardo's Hippolytus; or whether Lombardo, unlike Jason, will control both Medea and Phaedra. *Wild Things*, which made its debut during the height of the sexual scandal involving the American President Bill Clinton and his young intern Monica Lewinsky, reveals, however, what Jason, Sam Lombardo and Bill Clinton all discovered: *Omnia vincit Medea* ['Medea conquers all'].

## Notes to Chapter 8

1. Maria Wyke, 'Classics and Contempt: Redeeming Cinema for the Classical Tradition', *Arion*, 6, 1 (1998), 124–36.
2. Monica Silveira Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005).
3. Marianne McDonald, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992).
4. Jon Solomon, *The Ancient World in the Cinema* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2001).
5. *Classical Myth & Culture in the Cinema*, ed. by Martin M. Winkler (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); and *Classics and Cinema*, ed. by Martin M. Winkler (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1991).
6. Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre, 1660–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, ed. by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and *Agamemnon in Performance: 458 BC to AD 2004*, ed. by Fiona Macintosh and others

- (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). See also Fiona Macintosh, 'Tragedy in Performance: Nineteenth and Twentieth-Century Productions', in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. by P. E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 284–323.
7. *Wild Things*, dir. by John McNaughton (Columbia Pictures, 1998).
  8. Roger Ebert, 'Review: *Wild Things*,' 20 March 1998 <<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19980320/REVIEWS/803200305/1023>> [accessed 9 August 2009].
  9. Janet Maslin, 'Schoolgirls Make Alligators Look Like Ingenues', 20 March 1998 <<http://www.nytimes.com/library/film/032098wild-film-review.html>> [accessed 9 August 2009].
  10. Antiphanes, Cantharus, Dinolochus, Epicharmus, Eubulus, Rhinthon, Strattis, Quintus Ennius.
  11. *Euripides: Alcestis, Hippolytus, Iphigenia in Tauris*, trans. by Philip Vellacott (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974).
  12. Thanks to the anonymous referee for pointing out that 'Toller' is German for 'madder' and also the surname of a German Expressionist poet and dramatist, Ernst Toller.
  13. See, for example, N. W. Slater, *The Theatre of the Mind: Metatheatre in Plautus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981); Bronwyn Williams, 'Games People Play: Metatheatre as Performance Criticism in Plautus' *Casina*', *Ramus*, 22 (1993), 33–59.
  14. Ann G. Batchelder, *The Seal of Orestes: Self-reference and Authority in Sophocles' Electra* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1995), p. 137.
  15. I find no particular pop elements here. The Caribbean locale is both logical and appropriate given its proximity to Florida, the movie's setting.
  16. Here, the detail of Toller's action being unseen is mere convenience and not meant as an allusion to the classical stage practice of keeping unpleasant things concealed from the audience's view. At this point in the movie the classical stage practice has to be abandoned. Duquette has already been killed 'on-stage' and Lombardo is about to perish.
  17. The colour of her hair raises the expectation that she may be both seductive and evil. It also creates a contrast between her and Kelly Van Ryan, who has blonde hair and typically dresses in light colours.
  18. *Euripides: Medea*, ed. by Donald J. Mastronarde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 16–18.