MEDEA AND APARTHEID

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Since the time of the ancient Greeks themselves, Greek myth and dramas based on Greek myth have continued to provide inspiration to authors and artists. In the case of the Medea myth, Euripides' adaptation in his famous tragedy, first produced at the Great Dionysia in Athens in 431 BC, proved to be so successful that he may be said to have created a new standard version of the Medea myth which was recognized by all subsequent artists who made use of the myth.[1]

Euripides made the witch princess from the barbarian land of Kolchis a murderess who, in order to punish her disloyal husband, Jason, first engineers the death of Jason's new bride by magic and, as crowning horror, kills her own children before soaring away in a dragon drawn chariot. Euripides' interpretation of the violent ending of the tempestuous relationship between Medea and Jason became the ultimate source of scores of creative artists (Hunger 1959; Mallinger 1897; Mimoso-Ruiz 1980), amongst whom more than 60 dramatists (Van Zyl Smit 1987:242-244). The latest in this line of dramas is *Demea* by Guy Butler. Although Butler wrote this drama more than 30 years ago, political circumstances in South Africa made it impossible for the play to be staged until 1990. For the South African classicist it nevertheless remains of particular interest to investigate how Butler blends elements from the Greek prototype with South African history and circumstances.

Many scholars have studied the reworking of Greek mythic material by later dramatists (Conradie 1963 & 1976; Fuhrmann 1971; Hamburger 1962; Highet 1951). Their conclusions will first be considered and applied to some of the later Medea dramas before *Demea* will be analysed.

Briefly, scholars have distinguished two broad categories of modern drama based on Greek myth. The first category uses a specific ancient drama as its model and retains the characters and plot, although the names of characters are often adapted. The second category of modern drama uses ancient myth as its subject matter but is not modelled on any specific drama. The originality of the plays in the second category can thus not be in doubt, because, although the material has been borrowed from Greek myth, it has been fashioned into something totally new - a drama for which there is no ancient equivalent. Is there any merit or purpose, however, in reworking an ancient drama with almost the same characters and outline? Are these later plays not simply pale copies of the Greek masterpieces? No, not necessarily. It is possible for dramatists to alter character and motive within the same dramatic outline and thus to produce a new drama. This is what later playwrights strive for - to provide a new interpretation of the classical data which carries significance for their contemporaries.

Two strong motives for choosing myth as a vehicle in modern times have also been noted. First, it is sometimes expedient to present controversial ideas through mythical stories and plays. Even when no danger is attached to voicing ideas about injustice, resistance and change, authors have chosen to work with mythic material because, in general, the myths are not only relatively simple in outline, but also profoundly suggestive in content (Highet 1951:532). They deal with eternal human problems such as love, war, courage, tyranny, fate and man's relationship to powers beyond his control. Drama based on myth has therefore

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1 See Van Zyl Smit, E. 1987:4-10 and references cited there for Euripides' originality in his treatment of the Medea myth.

continued to remain topical, while a common mythic base has not restricted dramatists to a single interpretation.

A good example of divergent dramatic versions of a Greek prototype is provided by the large number of Medea dramas based on the tragedy of Euripides. This *Medea* is not easily or unambiguously interpreted, as the varied readings of scholars bear witness. The richly nuanced delineation of character, the complexity of the relationships between the characters and the subtlety of their motives for their actions are the cause of these problems of interpretation. But this same richness has provided later dramatists with divergent points of departure for creating their own Medea dramas. A study of subsequent Medea dramas makes it clear that each playwright chose certain aspects of the Euripidean drama as the basis of his/her new creation. Thus the Roman tragedian, Seneca, emphasizes the superhuman side of Medea's nature. Bereft of Jason's love and lacking any human comfort she consciously assumes the Medea role. This literary conceit would be impossible if Euripides' Medea did not exist as seminal example.

The 17th century French tragedian, Pierre Corneille, treats the material with an altogether lighter hand. He attempts to write a technically perfect drama and to keep his audience amused, but in the process the drama loses much of the horror of its ancient predecessors.

A more radical reinterpretation of the mythical data is that of the 20th century French playwright, Jean Anouilh. He concentrates on the intimate drama of the couple of Jason and Médée and moves the spotlight from the traditional catastrophic climax of the murder of the children. Médée still commits the horrific murder, but her escape in the chariot is replaced by suicide. For the first time Médée, representing the forces of anarchy, is clearly shown as coming off second best. The hero of the drama is Jason, whose positive approach to the problems of human existence leaves the audience with a feeling of moderate optimism.

In complete contrast the drama of a contemporary Flemish playwright, Johan Boonen, shows Medea in a sympathetic light. She is the victim of the relentless manipulation of the ruling powers, Kreoon and Jasoon. This Medea becomes the symbol of contemporary humankind, a mere pawn in the power games of governments.

The position of Medea as a foreigner and a barbarian, which is relevant in the Euripidean tragedy without dominating the drama, has been chosen as a focal point by a number of modern dramatists. This aspect has in some cases been developed so that the heroine is no longer of a different and inferior culture, but of a different and despised race. One of the earliest dramatic treatments of the myth in which race is an important factor is the *Medea* of H.H. Jahnn (1926). Jahnn was deliberately addressing the racist attitudes of his contemporaries; he himself equated the attitude of Europeans of his time to members of non-white races, with the Greek attitude to barbarians. He concluded that the only way in which he could clearly present the complexity of the problem of the marriage of Jason and Medea was by making Medea a Negress.

Several other modern dramatic versions of the Medea story present the adventure of Medea and Jason as a fable about colonialism and imperialism in which colour prejudice and cultural conflict play a considerable role. They are *Asie* (1931) by the French author Henri Lenormand, *The Wingless Victory* (1936) by the American verse dramatist Maxwell Anderson, and *African Medea* (1968) by the American Jim Magnuson. Lenormand and Anderson change the names of their dramatis personae and transfer the action to different parts of the world: to the French colonies in Asia and France itself (*Asie*), and to the Massachusetts town of Salem in the early 19th century (*The Wingless Victory*). Magnuson lays the scene of his drama in 19th century Portuguese colonial Africa, but retains the names of the two protagonists and even reintroduces mythical elements such as the Golden Fleece, which is not important in the Euripidean drama.

A dramatist's decision to transpose a classical drama to a new cultural environment is deliberate. Indeed it is sometimes intended thus to underline to the audience that the message of the play is intended for them. The remoteness of ancient Greece makes way for worlds known to the audiences of Lenormand and Anderson. Nevertheless, this process inevitably entails certain problems. For instance Lenormand and Anderson, who changed not only the ancient context and location, but also the title of the play and the names of the characters, were constrained to delineate new backgrounds for their dramas. Magnuson, on the other hand, merely by preserving the names of Medea and Jason, immediately linked his play to the rich mythical tradition of the Medea legend. Its various elements became the background of his drama and he could select and alter certain aspects to suit his theme and characterization.

In *Demea* Guy Butler has chosen a middle course. He has changed the names of his characters to suit his context without obliterating the link with the Greek originals. Thus the protagonist by anagram becomes Demea, a Tembu princess, while the Jason role is taken by Captain Jonas Barker, a British officer in the Peninsular wars, who, since 1815, has been an adventurer-trader in Southern Africa. Butler (1990) explicitly states that he was prompted to create his play by his interpretation of the Euripidean *Medea* and his concern for the circumstances in contemporary South Africa:

> I was particularly struck by the *Medea* of Euripides, which dealt with an issue much on my mind: racial and cultural prejudice ... In writing *Demea*, I have turned the *Medea* into a political allegory of the South African situation as I saw it, at the height of the idealistic Verwoerdian mania.

It is clear that although some of the other dramatists were familiar with more versions of the Medea drama than that of Euripides, Butler's sole source was the Euripidean tragedy.[2] *Demea* is set in the late 1820's in a frontier area of the Eastern Cape. Jonas and Kroon (Kreon) are both leaders of treks. Jonas has assembled a mixture of races in his party while Kroon heads a "pure white" trek. Jonas, however, has become disillusioned with the prospects of a mixed community and has decided to disband his trek, abandon his wife Demea and their children and then to marry Kroon's daughter and join his party. Jonas' abandonment of his black wife of 15 years'standing, Demea, thus indicates a radical revision of his political philosophy.

Butler has transposed the Euripidean drama in time and place. In order to point his moral - that *Demea* reflects not only events, conflicts and moral choices in the 19th century, but applies to our contemporary situation in South Africa - he has created a prelude which eases the audience into the history and the myth.

Three actors in modern dress plainly link the action to come with the policy of apartheid:

> They [The Boers] wanted a home where they could do what they liked,
> With no interference from the British,
> Where there would be places for all the different blacks,
> And every black be kept in his proper place.
> For themselves they only wanted a small pure-white state.

This device of a prologue emphatically associating the action of the historical drama with the present South African political situation is extended by a short account of the Greek myth of

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2 This is also stated by Prof. Butler in a letter (dated 3 March 1989) to the author:

"My only source was a translation of Euripides - and, of course, South African history just prior to the Great Trek for the setting, and Verwoerdian ethnic philosophy for much of the debate."

Jason and Medea. Fitzwilliam (Fitz), the children's tutor, reads this version to them:

> Jason, a trader, perhaps a pirate,
> A hero of renown in Greece,
> Chose a piebald crew of comrades
> To fetch from Colchis the Golden Fleece.
> The king's daughter fell for Jason.
> Medea helped him to steal that fleece.
> For him she sacrificed her brother.
> She bore two sons to this man from Greece.
> When Jason deserted her at Corinth
> To marry King Creon's daughter fair,
> Medea killed her, and her own children:
> Such was her rage, her black despair.
> Among the Greeks opinions differ:
> Some call her a foreign bloody bitch;
> Some say she's an almost innocent victim;
> Some say she's a healer, some a witch.

Stage directions require that as Jason, Medea and the children are mentioned their counterparts in Butler's play, Jonas, Demea, Charlie and George, should move onto the stage to identify the personae with the mythical characters. At the outset Butler thus ensures that the audience are aware of the origin of his drama in Greek myth and also alert to the implications the action may have for contemporary South Africa. In the process he assigns the same informative function to his prologue as that which critics have decried in Euripides as being too overtly explanatory.

Although Butler adopts the traditional Euripidean outline, he has expanded the plot in an attempt to express the complexity of the South African situation. To the Euripidean dramatis personae are added representatives of various aspects of colonial Southern Africa. Instead of the nine characters and chorus of the Greek tragedy, *Demea* has sixteen characters plus women and warriors. This expanded cast includes Rodney Parks, a Cockney storekeeper and bookkeeper; Carollus, a "Coloured" wagon driver and his wife, Aia, who takes part of the traditional Nurse's role here portrayed by Kantoni, a Tembu woman; Cobus a "Coloured" runaway slave and also a wagon driver; a Boer couple, the Van Niekerks; Agaan (Aigeus), childless chief of the Baharutsi, a local tribe; and Matiwane, chief of the Amabena, a Zulu tribe that has been driven out of their traditional home by the impis of Shaka.

After the prelude the dramatic action commences with a glimpse of life in the camp of Jonas' trek. Rodney is trading with a black woman but cannot understand her language and is helped by Kantoni. This indication of a cultural divide is emphasized by Cobus' and Kleinboy's remarks about the tutor's behaviour. He is a remittance man and an alcoholic, but because he is white, he is treated by the authorities with more consideration than they receive. The sense of unease conveyed by the expression of their bitterness is deepened by reports of a rift between Jonas and Fitzwilliam and Demea's refusal to eat or sleep. Aia sums up the situation: "This trek is all mad and sick".

Uncertainty about the future of the trek leads to Fitzwilliam and Kantoni describing the background to its formation. In this way the audience are given the background information about the central characters. Captain Jonas Barker on his way to trade in Tembuland stopped over at a mission station and was asked by the missionary to take one of their pupils who refused to be baptized back to her uncle's kraal. He agreed, but when they reached the kraal, she asked Jonas to take her with him. Although she did not wish to become a Christian, her education at the mission station had changed her and she no longer wished to wear tribal dress and follow tribal customs. Since that time Demea and Jonas had been together, living as man

and wife. He had even paid a bride price to her uncle. This account of the meeting lacks the dangerous elements of the legend of the Argonauts and the Golden Fleece, but substitutes its own elements of romance and is in keeping with the period and location of Butler's drama. This version moderates Jason's indebtedness to Medea for her help in overcoming all the perilous obstacles. More prosaically, Demea has helped Jonas to build up trading links by taking him to remote kraals where no white traders had been before. Jonas cannot reproach Demea for a Pelias episode, but in a measure to retain some part of the wild and witchlike character of Medea for Demea, Butler later has Jonas reproaching her for her callousness in causing the death of her half-brother in recovering a hundred sheep her tribe had stolen from them. This tamed version is, however, more plausible than Apsyrtus' macabre end in the original myth.

Jonas' association with Kroon is also discussed. The audience learn that they first met twelve years ago and that Kroon then already subscribed to his policy of racial purity. Jonas, however, maintained that "[t]he black people must be converted from their pagan ways, and become Westerners". Significantly, Jonas did not divulge the existence of his black wife, Demea, and their two children to Kroon at that time. However, according to Fitzwilliam, Jonas sincerely believed that a mingling of races in Africa was natural and inevitable. Fitz phrases Jonas' belief thus, "The mind and the heart of man are too strong to accept the skin as a prison". This idealism has been lost by the time the play opens.

The relaying of all the background information is necessary but makes for rather static drama. Furthermore, the increased cast also retards the development of the traditional plot. Thus the Van Niekerks come on stage during the extended first scene. Ostensibly they have come to buy baby blankets from Rodney, but their real purpose soon becomes apparent: it is to consult Demea about the dark skin of their baby and to sound out the possibility of joining Jonas' trek as they have been expelled from Kroon's. This episode shows how the application of criteria of racial classification may tear a community or family apart. The Van Niekerks who have "passed for white" for three generations are forced to reassess not only their place in the community but also their own attitude to people they formerly despised. Ironically, Van Niekerk is so conditioned to regarding people with a darker skin colour as inferior that he is almost unable to come to terms with the fact that he or his wife also has "coloured" blood: "Will I have to take orders from Griquas and Kaffirs?"

Although the infamous section 6 of the Immorality Act, and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, as well as the Population Registration Act have now been repealed, their devastating effect has been experienced by many South Africans. The emphasis laid on this evil is in keeping with Butler's endeavour to show the iniquities of apartheid legislation where the "most important fact about a person was the race into which he was born".

During the Van Niekerks' visit the tension is broken by Charlie and George running onto the stage excitedly to call Fitz to shoot a lynx which has killed her own cubs. This reminder of the crowning horror of the Medea legend is reinforced when Demea and Mrs. van Niekerk talk about the fate of the Van Niekerk child. Suspense mounts when, after the Van Niekerks have decided that they should join the trek, Jonas declares that he has lost faith in the future of a mixed community. It seems that he may be moved by appeals from Demea, Fitz and Carollus, but then Kroon arrives.

Kroon's intransigent attitude to the Van Niekerks is kept up in a scene between him and Jonas. This exchange serves further to spell out Kroon's doctrine so that when he meets Demea in the traditional exile scene the audience are familiar with his ideas. The conflict between Kroon and Demea is laced with sarcasm and quasi-servility on her part: "Explain, master. I long to understand". The plan of Kroon and Jonas is that Demea should return to her tribe while the two boys will be taken to the mission station. Kroon is adamant that the arrangements have to go ahead. Jonas is to marry his daughter at noon the next day. Kroon is,

however, so moved by Demea's evident distress that he grants her wish that her sons should stay with her until the next day instead of leaving that evening. In Butler's version the marriage of Jonas assumes symbolic significance as it is to coincide with the inauguration of Kroon's new state. The marriage would therefore be proof of the collusion of white English speaking South Africans (Jonas) with the architect of apartheid (Kroon), and their betrayal of their black countrymen (Demea and the two boys and the other non-white members of Jonas' trek).

Another innovation is that Kroon has made treaties of friendship with the different black tribes. He envisages peaceful co-existence in separate communities, but Demeas's reaction to drumbeats in the distance casts some doubt on the prospects of success of this plan. The uneasy atmosphere is enhanced by the choral conclusion of the scene:

Cobus: Is it not better to kill off these dreamers
Before they fasten their nightmare upon our land?
Demea: There must be a way; I heard a hint in the drums.
What shape it will take, who knows?
But it comes, it comes.

A messenger arrives from Agaan, chief of the Baharutsi. He is childless and wishes to consult Demea about remedies for this condition. Further echoes of the Euripidean tragedy intensify the feeling of approaching doom. Demea reveals that if Jonas cannot be dissuaded from his course of action, she intends punishing both him and Kroon. She uses a metaphor of childbirth to describe her planned retribution: "You cannot stop the birth of a revenge by wishing it away. I am growing big with it. It will be a painful birth, but I shall be proud". This strong reminder of the climax of the Greek drama is reinforced by the words now spoken by Aia. they recall the opening words of the Nurse in Euripides' tragedy: "I wish his wagon had never outspanned at the Mission Station beyond the green Amatolas; that its timbers still stood tall in the woods of Knysna, and the spokes of its wheels still wet with sap in the dripping Tsitsikamma".

Thus familiar South African names and concepts replace the mythical material of Euripides:

> How I wish the Argo had never reached the land
> Of Colchis, skimming through the blue Symplegades,
> Nor ever had fallen in the glades of Pelion
> The smitten fir-tree to furnish oars for the hands
> Of heroes who in Pelias' name attempted
> The Golden Fleece![3]

The choral interlude which is thus introduced heightens the tension by its focus on Demea's grief and rage at the breakup of her marriage. This scene inevitably serves to recall to the audience the horrific vengeance taken by Medea in a similar situation. Butler moulds the ingredients of his drama to touch the traditional data at certain points. This adds a dimension to his play which a purely imaginative work would lack. Elements culled from the Euripidean model are juxtaposed with those of Butler's own invention which conform to his altered version. Scene V, for instance, has Jonas calling together all the members of his trek in order to disband formally. Each is rewarded according to the length of service, but only the whites, Fitz and Rodney, are invited to join Jonas in going over to Kroon's trek. This scene of racial tension is interrupted by the arrival of a deputation from Matiwane, king of the Amabena. Matiwane wants to buy guns and hire soldiers in order to win back the land from which they have been driven by Shaka's impis. Jonas has, however, sold all his guns to Kroon and states

3 Translated Warner 1944.

that he, like Kroon, wishes to live in peace with all the black peoples. Once the deputation has left, Carollus and Kleinboy try to persuade Jonas that the presence of the Amabena means trouble. They want the Boers to be warned and insist that their only safety lies in all staying together. Jonas dismisses their appeal as a ploy to force him to change his plans. A new element of unease has been introduced.

At this point Jonas and Demea are alone for the first time. Like Medea in the Greek drama, Demea accuses Jonas of the betrayal of her love, ingratitude for her help to him in the past and desertion of the children. Like Jason, Jonas insists that he has made provision for them. Butler introduces an additional motive underlying Jonas' action. He confesses that he has changed. He is "tired of being yoked to a body and soul as different as night and day". Demea's passionate reproaches and appeals are met with an inventory of material goods at her disposal. The lack of communication culminates in Jonas leaving Demea when she greets what he regards as a creditable offer with scornful laughter. However Jonas' mention of twenty muskets and three barrels of gunpowder destined for Kroon gives Demea an idea for the form of her revenge. She calls Cobus and instructs him to fill three empty powder kegs with sand. She further promises Cobus, who is embittered by what he regards as Jonas' betrayal of the whole trek, that he shall have a white man to flog - Jonas. At this point in the drama it is clear that Demea is formulating a plan of retribution, but the details are still unclear. In the tragedy of Euripides Medea's plan for vengeance remains vague until the scene with Aigeus where the motif of childlessness gives her scheme some focus.

Similarly the visit of Agaan brings some clarity to Demea. In response to his lament about the catastrophe of childlessness Demea asks: "So, to take a strong revenge upon a man, you would kill his children first; make him die a double death?" In Euripides' version Aigeus provides Medea with a place of refuge so that she is assured of safety after her vengeance has been completed. Agaan's role is more complex. Demea enlists his aid by gaining his sympathy for her plight, but Agaan has signed a treaty with Kroon and has some appreciation for the civilization brought by the whites. In addition he fears their power. Nevertheless in concert with Matiwane he agrees to the plan that his warriors will kill the Boers the next day at the wedding. Butler substitutes this ploy which has historical precedents in Southern Africa, notably the ambush and slaughter of Piet Retief and his Voortrekkers at the kraal of Dingaan, chief of the Zulus in 1838, for the magic robe and tiara in the Greek drama.

Demea's total plan of revenge has not been as clearly outlined as that of Medea (in 772-797). Further aspects of Demea's scheme gradually emerge. After Charlie and George tell Demea that they would like to see the impis dancing at their father's wedding, there is a second scene between Demea and Jonas. Like her Greek counterpart she now pretends to be reconciled to her lot. She asks Jonas to allow their sons to take the guns and powder to Kroon's laager the next day: "As future Griquas it will matter much for them to have memories of a victorious white father - not a defeated black woman starting her lonely wagon back towards the south".

The tension between the apparent reconciliation and the audience's knowledge of Demea's design creates suspense which is sustained in the opening of the last scene. This scene shows Demea reverting to her tribal dress and casting off what she terms "slave's clothes". She takes leave of her sons. Then the other members of the trek leave and Jonas, dressed in his British uniform, departs for Kroon's laager.

When Demea is alone she reveals in a monologue that her reason for sending her sons to their deaths is to save them from suffering as she is - to spare them the humiliation of racial prejudice.[4]

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4 It is noteworthy that the motive of saving the children from the effects of race prejudice is cited by the protagonists in two other dramas based on the Medea myth, *Asie* and *The Wingless Victory*, while *African Medea* shows the mother even hating the whiteness in her children.

Cobus enters with the news that the whole of Agaan's army is hiding in the grass and will attack Matiwane's men when they have "finished off" the whites. There seems to be a lack of continuity here, as there is no indication in the play as to when, where and why Demea and Agaan made this part of the plan.

When Demea is told that her sons are dead she wishes Jonas to return so that she may see him suffer. Butler employs the psychological motif of Demea distancing herself from the deed. This is her reaction to Fitz's accusation that she deliberately planned the murder of her children: "I? No. The woman who planned it was a woman who lived with a white man, wearing a white woman's clothes; rotten because her brown body knew his white body! But as you see, I am not that Demea at all; I am calm, clothed as a black woman should be, and in my right mind". This escape from the Medea figure accepting responsibility for her action, which Euripides' protagonist does so exultantly, is part of the portrayal of a number of later dramatists.[5]

A description of the slaughter at Kroon's laager is given by Fitz, who represents the reaction of the ordinary person who, although sympathetic towards Demea because of Jonas' harsh treatment of her, cannot understand her actions and reactions. Jonas returns. He is completely dejected and meekly submits to be tied to his own wagon wheel and to be flogged by Cobus. Demea leaves, escorted by some of Agaan's soldiers.

The bleak ending of this drama holds no promise of hope for the future. The last words are spoken by Agaan: "In Africa a man must know what is his own or become a cave full of echoes. You had nothing here of your own; you brought good habits and a head and hands that could move a trek of wagons and make a trading business work. But to the strange and the cruel, the high and the deep things, you were deaf".

The 1990 production of Demea was met by a critically hostile response from the left. Thus, for instance, Guy Willoughby wrote "this maundering rewrite of Euripides' Medea is dull, endless and desperately shallow - a veritable proof of the deadness of a certain brand of starry-eyed liberalism in the 'new' South Africa". Leon de Kock was similarly dissatisfied: "The cast are virtually a tableau of talking heads, at the service of Butler's desire to make poetry out of a vastly dated and simplified view of the Great SA Race Problem". De Kock also sees as "historically questionable" the interpretation of Butler's allegory - "the betrayal by Jonas (the English) of Demea (black South Africa)". De Kock has yet a third reservation, that "a lingering condition like race prejudice" cannot trigger a tragic outcome. Here he is guilty of oversimplification because, as is shown in the play, race prejudice is one of the factors which lead to Jonas' rejection of Demea and her consequent desire for vengeance.

Although it may be felt that the dramatic action is at times static, *Demea* nevertheless is a fascinating literary blend of Greek tragic and South African elements. These last are provided not only by the setting but also by the language and imagery. *Demea* occupies a worthy position among the descendants of Euripides' *Medea* and deserves a special place in the study of the relevance of the Classics to modern society. The political theme of the drama, that the betrayal of trust between black and white will inevitably lead to catastrophe and that co-operation between the races is the only way ahead, is of paramount importance in the South Africa of the 1990's.

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5 Seneca's Medea claims to have restored her virginity by killing the children - the product and proof of her union with Jason. Boonen's Medea suffers the delusion that she has sent her children off on a happy journey.

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