Medea's Daughters

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Jones, Jennifer.
Medea's Daughters: Forming and Performing the Woman Who Kills.
The Ohio State University Press, 2003.
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A WEEK AFTER this book was completed, a young Texas housewife was convicted of first-degree murder after confessing to drowning her five children. Though to my knowledge, as of this writing there has been no dramatic representation of the case in play, movie, or television form, the trial itself could certainly be read as a dramatic narrative. Court TV followed the case in detail as did every major newspaper and every network news program. In the twenty-first century we are still fascinated and horrified by the specter of Medea.

It is not my intent here to analyze this case, but I do want to point to the possibility of a change in the traditional rhetoric surrounding women who kill. Though several columnists called for her execution as a “despicable murderer,” most people believed Andrea Yates to be mentally ill and in need of treatment rather than death. She was a woman who had twice attempted suicide and who had been hospitalized four times, most recently with a diagnosis of postpartum psychosis. Though a discourse of gender certainly resonates throughout the case, it was never the defining theme of the debate. Though the Texas branch of the National Organization for Women (NOW) came out in support of Yates as a woman who needed treatment for her mental illness, the discussion of gender was far outweighed in this case by the debate about the insanity plea and standards of responsibility under Texas law. The rhetoric of right-wing columnists who attacked NOW because of its support of Yates or who tried to frame the issue as one of unfair double standards that punish men more severely than women for equal violence, seemed to remain in the periphery of the cultural dialogue.

One aspect of the case does deserve attention in light of this book’s analysis. One of the key prosecution witnesses was psychiatrist Park Dietz, who testified that Andrea understood the difference between right and wrong
when she drowned her children. He also testified that Andrea told him she had gotten the idea of how to kill the children from an episode of *Law & Order*, a show for which Dietz was a frequent advisor. Later, defense attorneys discovered that the episode Dietz had referred to actually aired after the death of the children, and when confronted with this information Dietz admitted that Yates had never actually said anything to him about the show. It will be interesting to see if the *Law & Order* episode based upon the Yates case (and surely there will be one) references its own participation in her conviction.

There is no doubt that a television movie will emerge; Andrea Yates has already sold the book and movie rights to her story in order to raise money for her defense. What I wonder is what that movie will tell us about the woman who drowned her children because Satan told her that “they were not righteous.” Will she be portrayed as villain or victim? Or will we have learned by then that clinging to those simplistic binaries may help us feel safer in the world, but it will not help us save the children.