

Predictable Medea

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I

Introduction

In this paper, I am interested in thinking feminist legal theory from the perspective of those women who have suffered gendered violence and with the aim of thinking an ontology that might interrupt a type of action that remains within cycles of violence. Such an ontology must rethink also the core of the categories of selfhood and therefore also the making of the maternal. We need an ontological thinking of our being in the world that escapes the binary and essentialised traits of the masculine and the feminine, the mind and the body, the public and private. Surviving gender violence means essentially getting on with one's own life; speaking the injury but also releasing suffering and letting go. It implies overcoming an identity as a victim. Wounded attachments paralyse the feminine self and only repeat the logic of separation from one's community and relationality, one that is familiar to the subjectivity of violence. I argue that nothing new is offered by feminist theory in theorising a more empowered feminine subjectivity as a reaction to violence. The same ontological mechanisms of violence become re-appropriated. Rather, feminist theory needs to embrace natality and newness in thinking against gendered violence and transform itself.

Drawing from the philosophical theories of scholars such as Adriana Cavarero and Hannah Arendt, I will discuss that it is always possible to begin from the unique and corporeal body that each of us inhabits, the unique who-ness that, in Arendtian terms, is always revealed in words and deeds. Such awareness of one's bodily selfhood as singular, corporeal, vulnerable and dependent on the community of others leads to an ontology of embodied vulnerability. That is, an ontology that thinks of us as fragile, impermanent and vulnerable and yet as capable of acting unpredictably. The embracing of an ontology of embodied vulnerability leads to an awareness of the trespasses and injuries that we inflict on one another and a focus on empathic categories such as forgiveness. Through this ontological perspective, feminist political action can choose to depend upon continually

forgiving and letting go of injuries and releasing one another from what we have done thoughtlessly, creating unpredictability and newness.

II

Medea and the Predictability of Violence

Medea is a feminine character who provides an interesting point of analysis here. In different operating treatments of the story, Medea helps her lover Jason to achieve his goals.¹ She appears at the beginning of the tragedy in her role of helper-maiden. However, later in the story, Medea's character becomes one of resentment and vengeance and she commits infanticide. She seems to break with the stereotypes of women and mothers seen as traditionally passive and victims under patriarchy. By committing the infanticide of her own children, she is rather seen as acting unpredictably.

Medea and Jason lived together for years and had two legitimate children. Medea loved Jason, risked for him, sacrificed home and family and even committed crimes to help him. Now Jason is remarrying another woman, Creon's young daughter. By doing this, Jason is following the script of patriarchy. He does not care about Medea, but only about achieving social status, and he uses women as tools and means to his own ends. There is no community in his vision, only the narrow, short-term thinking of a subject of violence. Jason is surely shameless, cruel and conscienceless as he does not realise that Medea's world is at the verge of collapse. As a woman in Greece, Medea has made her husband and children the focus of her life. Without her family, everything seems to fall apart. The infanticide of her own children is the only thing she thinks she can do to restore balance in her world, the only appropriate reaction to her loss and to Jason's betrayal. Marriage, love and children are only death in Medea's eyes. Now Medea's emotions are clear; she feels that whoever has done harm to her must suffer harm. Her retributive emotion contains a demand for justice. By killing her children, she asserts herself as a subject of resentment but also as a subject that shows herself to be powerful, independent and capable of doing justice.

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However, I argue that Medea is a mother who, by refusing and resisting the essentialised predictability of motherhood, does not provide anything new; rather she follows the predictable identity of a subject of violence and of the masculine symbolic order. Her actions remains trapped between the experience of victimhood and that of resentment. Medea's reaction cannot be considered unpredictable but rather predictable. Medea only re-appropriates and repeats the subject of distributive resentment of patriarchy, as well as liberalism, human rights and feminism, the gendered masculine subject, a subject of vengeance and willingness to master others. Medea's reaction to patriarchal violence shows also that often women seek political and public solutions for their sufferings that might be incompatible with the singularity, vulnerability and relationality of their human condition and personal lives.

Adriana Cavarero has well engaged with the essentialised ontology of the feminine by being critical of the stereotypes of the good mother.² For Cavarero, the maternal figure evokes the human condition of exposure and vulnerability. But this – for Cavarero – does not lead necessarily to an ethics of care, but rather to an ethics of responsibility towards the vulnerability of others. If one works only with the stereotypes of either spiritual maternity or destructive maternity as in Medea, one risks repeating two different versions of patriarchal discourse rather than opening up the radical dilemma that is at the basis of an ethics of relations. Cavarero works with the patriarchal stereotypes of the mother as feminine and as such vulnerable, weak and fragile. However, within such stereotypes, she finds human categories to rethink ontologically the selfhood of women and men beyond any gendered essentialisation. Consequently, Cavarero's perspective confirms the very predictability of Medea's violent reaction as inscribed within the masculine version of gendered essentialisms in which we are constructed.

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Human Rights and forgiveness

Feminist and women's groups have fought constructively for the affirmation of women's rights within a masculine human rights agenda and have achieved some visibility of the issue of violence against women. Originally, human rights were in fact thought only from a neutral, but in reality masculine, point of view. Issues of violence against women such as rape or domestic violence were not taken into account in the main human rights documents.³ And yet, this newly achieved visibility of violence against women has not disrupted the ontological way of approaching violence. Often this visibility of gendered violence occludes rather than opens up the complex relationality and material dimension of violence itself. Rather than rethinking the ontology of violence and unfolding the categories it implies, the discourse on violence against women has been simply integrated into the existing framework of human rights, using the same ontological thinking.

The categories on which human rights discourses sit have not been touched. Within such rights discourses, escaping violence for women implies the use of the ontological categories of the public and masculine subject such as autonomy, toughness and the sacrifice of connection. Women are encouraged to leave violent relations and separate themselves from those threatening violence. Abusive behaviour is constructed as a crime and is subjected to legal punishment; situations of abuse are ended through the arrest of the perpetrator. From a different perspective, violence often relates to the everyday lives of women and happens in relational and familiar contexts, especially when violence and abuses are intra-familial.

Consequently, violence needs to be unfolded by questioning the categories of neutrality, and the public/private divide on which human rights theory is presupposed. Adriana Cavarero has shown that what is attributed to women as private is in reality attributable to everyone.⁴ She has unravelled the essence of the private considered as feminine and has shown that everybody, male and female, is vulnerable, corporeal and dependent on one other. It becomes important not to follow a script of a fictitious public

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and divided ontology of invulnerability. If one approaches a violent act through a grid of vulnerability rather than the current masculine ontology of rights, things might appear in different ways. A violent act means trespassing – to miss, to fail, to go astray. Through a vulnerability lens, a violent act might be read to be the result of a misjudgement of reality, acting as if one were isolated and apart, which is a delusion of reality and a missed vision of the community in which we are situated. In addition, a violent reaction to violence can be read as one remaining attached to pain and resentment.

In cases of gendered violence, the tragedy is that the victimised person can be damaged so deeply as to be robbed of her future. The movement of her life can be stopped at the moment of the injury, which continues to transmit pain. The liberal subject of rights – including ‘women’s rights’ – do not seem to help to stop the pain of the injury as the subject of rights reacts to a wrongdoing with resentment through the logic of retribution. A woman who is in a condition of resentment is a being full of pain, acted upon by the experience of pain as pain has been internalised.⁵ Her reactions consist in blaming the object that has produced pain, and by doing this, she remains trapped within the desire for revenge and vengeance. Reacting with resentment and vengeance has the effect of continuing the cycle of violence and of mastering others. Through resentment, victims are vulnerable as they remain in a dialectic with the perpetrator in an attempt to assert one’s worth. On the contrary, newness can only happen when the victim moves away from reacting violently by wishing to master others. The feelings generated within a discourse of human rights are not only those of righteousness, freedom and independence, but also of anger, resentment, hatred and vengeance. The strengths of a subject of rights are courage and determination; its weakness being arrogance, external focus, the predictability and limits related to the fact that the other remains a *what*, of whom even his *who-ness* is rejected. Human rights function in fact on the legalistic level of constructed predictability of the *what* and participate in the logic of power and sovereignty of a subject that is disconnected from the very material and singular human being who has experienced violence.

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What becomes important is speaking and giving voice to the violence suffered, talking back to what has happened, what we have endured, what we have suffered. This allows breaking with the silence of violence and promotes personal healing. In doing this, the liberal subject of human rights might be useful, as it allows one to be a public subject by speaking in a public setting. And yet, this speaking must be linked to acting responsibly as it needs to reconnect with the private of us, our *who-ness*. Speaking – for Hannah Arendt – implies acting politically and creatively.⁶ It means being responsible for *who* we are. This is not comparable with the autonomous and righteous responsibility of current normalising liberalism and human rights discourses. One needs to act extraordinarily and to reveal *who* one is. It means disrupting, breaking the normalising philosophical and political settlement, unsettling social rules and identities. We are not responsible for *what* we are, for what we have been made by history and circumstances. We might always instead be responsible for *who we are*.

For Hannah Arendt when we behave predictably we are irresponsible, we let our history act for us.⁷ A man or a woman who enacts violence reacts predictably, only reproducing the identities which one is supposed to be. Responding in a different way is being unpredictable, being *who one* is. In this sense, Medea only acted following the what, the social identities that constructed her. She did not connect to her *who-ness*. *Who one is* implies forgiveness which is not an external and public identity category or *what*. Forgiveness is instead a category of the private, of the *who* that comes from an awareness of our human condition of vulnerability. It challenges the influence of the past over the present in a way that a wrongdoing is deprived of its power to alienate. Forgiveness delivers the future as it is able to remove that dead weight from our past and give one's back life. In this sense, forgiveness, as Arendt says, is also a promise⁸. Forgiving is intended in the sense of giving away, removing, unveiling the mask of the *what* which is not organically a part of the injured singularity; it is also moving towards a new relationality between the two singularities, of the offender and of the injured. Facts cannot be changed, what has happened has happened and remains so. But the meanings of the facts can be changed by a mechanism of newness. Surely, forgiveness requires a time of

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withdrawal, reflection, remembering and gradual release, but only forgiveness – as linked to our condition of vulnerability – can allow the experience of change and newness.

Therefore, by merging together the Cavareian ontology of singularity and corporeality and the Arendtian theory of action, there seems to be space for the possibility of unpredictability and newness in the human response to violence. An unpredictable response to violence implies ontological categories such as forgiveness. We cannot refuse forgiveness just because traditionally it appears to be inscribed in the stereotypes of the feminine; neither should we resent nor fight back, re-appropriating the law of the father. A forgiving selfhood – as I am speculating – does not belong to the stereotypes of the feminine or motherhood, but rather to an ontology of singularity, vulnerability and of the community. Within the community in which we are necessarily situated, those who harm us are usually those who are most intimate with us as women, because we let down our guards and our vulnerability is exposed to them.

However, those who commit violent acts stand in an unsustainable and illusory position of separation from relationality and the community. Peace in the community is broken by the harmful actions of those people. Violence is in fact a problem of the relation between singular human beings within their community. A violent action is an action that trespasses others and dissolves the community; it leads to a breach of peace. The perpetrator acts as if he is isolated from the community, invulnerable and separated. He is living as an isolated individual, one who does not need to live in the community itself. However, if violence provides one with control and power in the short term, in the long term it undermines the relations between people in the community. If this is the case, we cannot fight violence via mechanisms of separation and vengeance. A community is possible only if an ontology of forgiveness is considered.

Forgiving becomes an act of newness that allows the possibility of restoring a community and risking exposure again. Forgiveness rests on a gesture beyond the judicial instance, a matter of how one feels about oneself and the other, an attempt to overcome resentment and create a break in cycles of violence. It does not involve complicity or acquiescence in wrongdoing. Rather it is grounded in the ontology of awareness of the

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unique vulnerability of each of us. Awareness in such a context means coming to terms with what is most human in us, seeing ourselves in new ways, embracing human vulnerability, looking deeply into oneself in self-enquiry and self-understanding and expanding the range of what one thinks is a possible response to human harmful behaviour.

Forgiveness is not conditional on repentance. Repentance is a welcome radical honesty, a moment when the guilty singularity stops running from the truth about him-self. However, forgiveness cannot require repentance as its condition. Forgiveness conditioned on repentance or as a means to restore normality is not forgiveness. If the perpetrator truly repents and changes then there is no forgiveness. If normality is restored then forgiveness is not achieved. For Jacques Derrida, forgiveness cannot be normal, normative or normalising but needs to remain exceptional, in the face of the impossible and outside the retributive logic of exchange.⁹ This is also in line with the Arendtian notion of forgiveness of the *who* beyond the *what*. Pure forgiveness is an unconditional work of the self where the self – despite any injury suffered – refuses to reproduce the cycle of violence and responds and acts peacefully.

IV

Conclusion

Feminism has fought sexual and gendered violence in different ways. It has opposed the standard masculine subjectivity with an empowered female subjectivity and has provided valid critiques of subjectivity itself. However, feminism can step into newness, can think the unpredictable and begin to change the unchangeable of gendered and sexual violence. Seeing the other as a worthy and vulnerable human being sets the self free from demands, frees the other and creates a new community. The secret of growth is not to run away but to stay clear, centred and connected.

Forgiveness does not imply a weak feminine subjectivity but a strong one, one that is capable of withdrawing after injury, becoming aware and delimiting the experience of

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the injury, able to decide, face, let go, tolerate, accept, discern. If feminism embraces the subject of human rights and the current symbolic order – that is, the neutral but in reality male subject of liberalism – the feminist subject will continue to project, to blame the external system for her pain and injuries. The implication for injured women is that they will find it very difficult to remain in the present as they will need to be always thinking that things should be different – more just – and will be planning for the next step. In pledging our lives to an ontology of singularity and vulnerability, we choose the meaning of our lives and of the community in which we live and act. Using an ontology of singularity, vulnerability and relationality can produce change, transformation and newness.

In forgiveness, there is then the miracle of natality. The birth of a baby gives a glimpse of hope and shows the power of natality in the human condition. As Cavarero says, the newborn is also a new life totally exposed to others, a life as totally vulnerable because dependent totally on others for its preservation.¹⁰ The vulnerability linked to natality, calls for the necessity of acting responsibly towards vulnerability, acting responsibly following the *who one is* rather than the *what one is* of social construction. Forgiveness is a form of this responsible acting that breaks apart the cycles of violence, a way to embrace natality in human relationships; it provides a counter-gift to feminism and women.

This also implies a new making of the maternal, beyond the masculine symbolic order and the related stereotypes of the feminine. Rather, the maternal as expression of an ontology of vulnerability and singularity belongs to both women and men, to people in their singularity and inescapable vulnerability. Such awareness of the maternal can unsettle philosophical models of subjectivity, grounded instead on an individual as separated from others who still need to affirm his power by excluding and negating others.

Within such a new forgiving response, Medea would have acted creatively, anew. She would not have shown weaknesses but the strength of a forgiving self that comes from understanding, a being who ends suffering and does not reproduce it. Harming other people, especially vulnerable ones, is not an act of freedom but an act of despair and

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ignorance and does not bring peace or happiness. In the end, Medea's violent and predictable reaction clearly shows that the other or enemy lies within us, in our wrong perception of human vulnerability and uniqueness. Medea makes us reflect on the seed of otherness in all of us, the other as violence is within all human beings. But there is the possibility of becoming aware of this and responding against violence with natality, newness and unpredictability.

¹ Euripides, *Medea* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1910); Seneca, *Medea* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973); Crista Wolf, *Medea: a Modern Retelling*, (New York, Doubleday, 1998).

² Adriana Cavarero with Elisabetta Bertolino, 'Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: an Interview with the Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero' *differences*, 19, n1 (2008); Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: a Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995).

³ See, for instance, the 1984 *Convention Against Torture And Other Cruel, Inhuman Or Degrading Treatment Or Punishment*. The Convention deals with neutral and non-gendered forms of torture, inhuman and degrading treatment and does not mention rape or other sexual abuses that are especially suffered by women.

⁴ Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Towards a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005)

⁵ Wendy Brown, 'Wounded Attachments' *Political Theory*, 21, N. 3 (1993); Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (London: Athlone Press, 1983); Joram Graf Haber, *Forgiveness* (Savage: Rowman & Littlefield, 1991).

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

⁷ Arendt, *ibid.*

⁸ Arendt, *ibid.*

⁹ Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 1993).

¹⁰ Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

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