

Reception and influence of classical media on the tabloids' representations of Diana, Princess of Wales

The star of *Hello!* magazine's special edition, August 2017, featured almost daily in the column inches of the *Mail Online*, a *Tatler* cover girl and the subject of an Oscar winning film (*The Queen*) – media attention surrounding the late Diana, Princess of Wales, shows little sign of subsiding, though twenty years has elapsed since her unexpected death. No media storm of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has quite matched the headlines that followed the 31<sup>st</sup> of August 1997 or engendered such outpouring of public grief and recriminations. It is then timely to look back to classical influence, present in abundance in the way the media depicted Lady Diana Spencer: the press pack have their ancient predecessor, with Tacitus as Royal Correspondent and Virgil and Euripides producing some of the more sensational and scurrilous portrait sketches. In print their villains and their national treasures are very much the prototypes still invoked by today's tabloids. The arcane position of royal bride arguably in itself invited the media to hark back to Greek and Roman virtues and project the traits of famous classical figures onto this archaic institution. Exposés on her youthful glamour, popularity and tragedies were hugely profitable for the media, proof one argues that classical influences were of huge importance. The mass mourning of 1997 has its roots in the death of Germanicus<sup>1</sup>; as Diana was “the most hunted person of the modern age” in the words of her brother, Charles Spencer, so Queen Dido of Carthage seems to drift into focus, as the “wounded doe”<sup>2</sup>, both ultimately devastated by the men in their lives. Medea, as a model of recklessness and calculation resonates through the criticisms made by the traditionalist tabloids of the 1990s, whilst there are echoes of Aspasia in the media frenzy which cast Diana as an activist, stirring up the political scene and as a patron of the arts. Seemingly, as long as the media publishes royal sagas, a new case of classical reception is brought into the public domain and interpreted, meaning our reliance on the stock characters formed in classical literature is absolute.

It is unsurprising then that the Prince of Wales aptly saw his divorce as a “kind of Greek tragedy” that “would certainly make a very good play” in letters to Nancy Reagan<sup>3</sup>, and the most resonant Greek tragedy in this case is Euripides' *Medea*. For the media of the 1990s rarely focused on the whole back story to the end of his marriage to Diana, but in a wildly partisan fashion, focused on the split and its fallout, just as Euripides' dealt with the matter in 431BC. The late Princess of Wales received in equal measure criticism and praise in the tabloids for her openness and daring, especially in discussing the causes of the breakdown of her marriage, and in this retaliation, Medea can be seen as the truly defining effigy, on whose stereotype the media of the '90s built their slants and projections of the vengeful wife. Firstly, Medea carries out the most shocking of revenge plots, making her the most iconic bitter ex-wife, who, unlike Aeschylus' Clytemnestra, faces no punishment, except that which was self-inflicted. Medea, most of all, appears a strategist, her “forethought is remarkable”<sup>4</sup> – she enlists Aegeus to ensure her safety before arranging to meet Jason to mollify him, then uses her children to deliver poisoned gifts to Glauce, her replacement, before killing her children to destroy the foundations of Jason's life. Similarly Diana faced huge criticism for publicly raising her concern that her husband was unsuitable to succeed to the throne and by exposing his mistress to the press. Nevertheless, Medea makes a glorious escape at the end of the play on a chariot drawn by dragons, and this

<sup>1</sup> M Beard, *The strange similarities between Diana, Princess of Wales, and Germanicus*, *Tatler*, Volume 311, Number 1, 2016, p.79

<sup>2</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, David West (translator), Penguin, London, 2003, Book 4, line 70, p. 71

<sup>3</sup> H Furness, *Prince Charles called end of marriage to Diana 'Greek tragedy' in letters to Nancy Reagan*, *The Telegraph*, June 4<sup>th</sup> 2017

<sup>4</sup> Euripides, *Medea*, Philip Vellacott (translator), Penguin, London, 1963, line 742

arguably set a new precedent, that the rejected lover now can have the chance to reform her life in Athens' sanctuary independently, rather than the traditionalist preference for the Clytemnestra figure to receive her just desserts. In parallel to this, after her shocking 1995 Panorama interview with Martin Bashir, a "nuking" of her ex-husband, according to constitutional historian David Starkey, the tabloids went into overdrive to see Diana follow a new life with the glitzy and suspect Al-Fayed family in the Mediterranean. Medea it seems was very much the forerunner of the socially ambiguous ex-wife, making us unsure of whether she is a pariah or to be praised, and the same dichotomy divided the media of the 1990s.

For like Medea, Diana was portrayed as breaching with the royal protocol of restraint, and the key belief of the Athenians, in no excess (τὸ μῆδεν ἄγαν). Medea in contrast to this strict regime represents headstrong wilfulness in complete contradiction to Greek belief in how a hero's wife ought to unassumingly behave, for she fights back: "let no one think of me as humble or weak or passive; let them understand I am of a different kind: dangerous to my enemies"<sup>5</sup>. This defective royal bride then, is willing to do damage, and in the same way, Diana's cooperation with Andrew Morton's tell all book of 1992, discussing the cool emotional detachment of the royal family, her bulimia and post-natal depression was highly criticised. The popular journalist Auberon Waugh stated that Diana was "a media-obsessed harpie for whom no intelligent person should spare a single serious thought" and a "manipulative anorexic, given to hysterical mood-swings"<sup>6</sup>, words that could easily have been plucked from Jason's mouth. For Auberon Waugh's focus on Diana's appearance, dismissing her intellectually, betrays the extent of classical influence on the media. Waugh demonstrates the same paternalistic and patronising insolence to Diana's plight as Jason to Medea: "If women didn't exist, Human life would be rid of all its miseries"<sup>7</sup> is perhaps his defining opinion. Clearly, he perceives Medea's problems as self-inflicted, in no way stemming from his own actions but because she "would not give up your ridiculous tirades against\the Royal family"<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, it is not hard to argue that the *Medea* offers the ultimate model on how to discredit and degrade a royal wife, and a model that still works to this day. Classical influence on the media's paternalistic prejudice even verged into directly lifting from Euripides' *Medea*, in particular, in the objectifying of what Diana wore, as according to the front pages, the most deadly weapon each woman had was the "Revenge Dress", one gold and poisoned, the other Christina Stambolian's stunning creation, both used to devastating effect.

Considering that this paternalism seemed so strong in 431BC when *Medea* first debuted, it comes as a surprise that Aspasia, the first female political force and cultural leader achieved great success in a similar environment. Aspasia's impact and popularity amongst Athens' learned classes was not dissimilar to the levels Diana achieved as "the People's princess" to use Tony Blair's words. Aspasia had broken down social divides and class structures by being a prominent metic (immigrant), let alone a prominent woman, in much the same way as the media modelled Diana's popularity as stemming from her common touch, that Diana had "touched (literally) the most needy and excluded"<sup>9</sup>. Aspasia's influence has been recorded in many different guises by the men surrounding her, according to their own partiality, and this divisive nature, as the prototype wife-(or mistress)-with-a-cause reflects the continued disputes within the media representation of Diana. Rarely are male figures presented with such polarity by male writers in classical literature, so it is thus paramount to look at one of the few early activist women. Aspasia surpassed the limited expectations of an immigrant woman, by founding schools, by teaching Socrates and Pericles rhetoric, and possibly even writing Pericles' famous Funeral Oration,

<sup>5</sup> Euripides, *Medea*, line 807

<sup>6</sup> E Fay, *Eminent Rhetoric: Language, Gender, and Cultural Tropes*, Praeger Publishers, 1994, p.15

<sup>7</sup> Euripides, *Medea*, line 574

<sup>8</sup> Euripides, *Medea*, line 457

<sup>9</sup> M Phillips, *We don't need the cult of Diana revived again*, The Times, Tuesday July 25 2017, p.28

according to Plato in *Menexenus*. Conversely, Aspasia faced complete dismissal by her critics: she stood accused of helping to start the Samian War, according to Aristophanes in *the Acharnians*; meanwhile the incensed Plutarch, writing hundreds of years after her death, blamed her for all of Pericles' mistakes, diminishing the intelligence of "that shameless bitch Aspasia"<sup>10</sup>, whilst her actions reduced Pericles to "bursting into floods of tears during her trial"<sup>11</sup>. Equally, Waugh's criticism of Diana as an empty headed harpie shows that the main recourse of discrediting prominent women still relies on our classical influences, that to emphasise supposed mental imbalances and folly is still acceptable. Like Aspasia, Diana was celebrated for innovating new approaches, but in her case, it was not to rhetoric or philosophy, but calling for a worldwide ban on landmines, for help for the homeless and using her fame to stop discrimination against people with AIDs. Fundamentally, however, the flaws of the modern media are directly due to the futile classical approach to criticising Aspasia, for Plutarch acknowledges "the extraordinary art or power this woman exercised which enabled her to captivate the leading statesmen of the day" and that she possessed "rare political wisdom"<sup>12</sup>. In this acknowledgement therefore there is a basic respect for steadfast convictions and hard work, which spin and labels from adverse media could not undermine.

Thus, the reception of powerful women in the ancient world often sees them in an ambivalent fashion, with their right to expression, their popularity and their intelligence often under scrutiny, as has influenced several aspects of the 1990s' media response to Diana, Princess of Wales. The formation of the archetypal wronged woman however is transformed by Virgil into an extremely recognisable character, as victim, which comes into focus in the depiction of lone Queen Dido. Similarly to the way in which certain media presented Diana, Dido's faults are imperceptible, for she is aristocratic with long lineage in Tyre, industrious, independent and the type to adhere to Virgil's edict: 'parcere subiectis'<sup>13</sup>. That her demise is due to a mere man is the beginning of the authoritative cementing of polarity in male strength and female weakness; even a Queen who builds cities and fights off Numidian advances can be humiliated by a future King. Dido's trials and tribulations, as the rejected party and tragic figure resonates with modern perceptions and the editorial spreads of the late 1990s much more than Medea. Furthermore, Virgil identifies the forebear of the paparazzi and it's far reaching effects: "Of all the ills there are, Rumour is the swiftest"<sup>14</sup>. In Carthage as in Fleet Street, speculation and allegation travelled. Twenty four hour rolling news and the telephoto lens that so influenced public perception of Diana is aptly summarised in "an eye that never sleeps, a mouth and a tongue that are never silent and an ear always pricked"<sup>15</sup>. Tabloid sensationalism is also an area in which Virgil shows great foresight, as Rumour was "holding fast to her lies and distortions as often as she tells the truth"<sup>16</sup>, an overhanging problem of the classical world that remains in the dissemination of today's information.

The public reaction to the death of the Princess of Wales, the "Show Us You Care" sentiment of 1997's *Daily Express* sees elements of Dido's death come to the fore and indicates the role of classical reception following Diana's death. The production of Marlowe's *Dido, Queen of Carthage* at Kensington Palace in 2008 exemplified this, as the play echoed the ongoing theme of unlucky royal women, regal but with abject status, a notion that had struck a chord so clearly in 1997<sup>17</sup>. In

<sup>10</sup> Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, Ian Scott-Kilvert (translator), Penguin, London, 1976, p.191

<sup>11</sup> Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, p.199

<sup>12</sup> Plutarch, *The Rise and Fall of Athens*, p.190

<sup>13</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, line 854, p. 138

<sup>14</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 4, line 176, p. 74

<sup>15</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 4, line 184, p. 74

<sup>16</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 4, line 189, p. 74

<sup>17</sup> P Aebischer & K Prince, *Performing Early Modern Drama Today*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2012, p. 117

*the Aeneid*, at the point of Dido's death, her people turn away from their disapproval of her relationship with Aeneas to the extent that "heavens gave back the sound of mourning. It was as though the enemy were within the gates and the whole of Carthage falling"<sup>18</sup>, and unlike the Medea figure, Dido's popularity and her glamour enabled her to win back her own people, whereas Medea was exiled by almost everyone. Clearly the rejected lover model had undergone some drastic changes in its transfer from Greece to Rome. This occurs in another aspect, what mileage does the classical tragic heroine have after the split? Through Virgil and Euripides there is a very different reception. Medea's future in Athens is indistinct but she is afforded a new life, whereas the Queen of Carthage in essence becomes a device, a turning point, which in many ways revisionist historians see Diana's role as emanating. Both Dido and Diana were essentially depicted as serving a purpose for their men. In *the Aeneid*, following Dido's demise, her role is to act as a warning to spur Aeneas on, as Anchises says: "I so feared the Kingdom of Libya would do you harm"<sup>19</sup>—already by Book Six, despite a brief meeting between the former lovers (where significantly Dido is silent), she is being recast as a corrective measure, and in the modern media, Diana too is now arguably seen as a catalyst or lever, more important in bringing the monarchy into the modern age than in her individual power to change the world with her celebrity. Thus there is a key change in classical influence, made by Virgil, which has been duly mimicked by revisionist historians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the way they present Diana, Princess of Wales.

However, one suggests that Euripides, Plutarch and Virgil's depictions of the tragic yet powerful woman does not wholly translate accurately in this case: Medea may have taken vengeance like a man; Aspasia may have thought like the best of them; Dido may have ruled like a man but to be mourned in classical time, one really needed to be a man. Thus it is the grief after Germanicus' death in AD19, where "crowds ran through the city"<sup>20</sup> that is the most accurate comparandum with the two million that lined the Mall, incited by the media storm of September 1997. Mary Beard has written wittily on the almost universal parallels of the public mourning that took place after Germanicus and Diana's deaths and indeed there are strong resemblances in their presentation to the public. Tacitus was adamant that Germanicus had in "both his looks and his words...inspired respect. Yet this dignity and grandeur befitting his lofty rank had been unaccompanied by any arrogance"<sup>21</sup>, and these sentiments were identically applied to Diana post-mortem. In grief and crisis, the media comes into its own in imitating the classical impulse to build a faultless rendering of a flawed personality. Traditionalists, dismissive of Diana as a Medea or Dido figure were perturbed at the blanket news coverage following her death, for "The public knew nothing of Diana or her family situation other than what the media had told them. So what were they grieving?"<sup>22</sup>

Undeniably, the answer is image, the image certain outlets had devised, sourcing their villains and national treasures from the stock characters created by Roman media. From Tacitus, writing after the event, there are several key figures, replayed in 1997: there is the dignified next of kin in contrast to the unfeeling extended family, with Agrippina the widow, bringing home Germanicus' ashes in hushed silence and composed suffering, and equally Diana's brother, Earl Spencer who, in arranging her burial at his family home, supposedly made a symbolic snub to Diana's adopted family; the role of children is equally important for public show, with Nero and Drusus brought out on display in Brundisium and put before the senate by Tiberius to garner sympathy, in the same way the British press pressed the monarchy to compel Diana's young sons to walk behind the gun carriage, a forced participation in the media spectacle. Lastly the villains,

<sup>18</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, p88, line 670

<sup>19</sup> Virgil, *The Aeneid*, Book 6, Line 655, p.134

<sup>20</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, Penguin, London, 1988, p.117

<sup>21</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, p.113

<sup>22</sup> M Phillips, *We don't need the cult of Diana revived again*, The Times, Tuesday July 25 2017, p.28

the adopted family, remain the same, as does the hyperbolic rhetoric: “everyone’s feelings were indistinguishable; the cries of men and women, relatives and strangers, blended in a single universal groan”<sup>23</sup> whilst “everyone knew that Tiberius could scarcely conceal his delight at the death of Germanicus. He and the Augusta made no public appearance”<sup>24</sup>. This fallacious blend of media sensationalism was a ‘consensus gentium’ that did not exist, but truly innovated the argumentation theory of ‘argumentum ad populum’, of active misrepresentation. Classical reception of its own tragic events has in this respect hugely influenced a modern day re-enactment, an explicit confirmation that classical influence still stokes the fires that power the modern day media’s inflamed sagas.

To conclude, it is undeniable that Euripides and Virgil were the key innovators in forming the prototype ‘wronged woman’. In addition to this, that prototype would remain easily recognisable thousands of years later, as a stock character that takes few alterations to still make front page news, plagiarised by the tabloids with great profitability. By extension of this, the public psyche and the projections they actively seek out are keenly receptive to classical morals and criticisms. However, this also affirms the power of the media: Plutarch blackened Aspasia’s reputation years after her death with such success that her achievements were effectively dismissed and hidden for millennia, inverse to the enduring popularity of Pericles; Virgil’s swift dismissal of Dido encourages the reader also to swiftly move on with Aeneas, without qualm. To my mind, however, it is a fundamental fact that when classical media turns in favour of an individual, it has the power to almost overthrow its own monarchy and someone else’s as well, two thousand years on, such is its universal influence.

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<sup>23</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, p.119

<sup>24</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, p.120