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Poison and Horses: On Female Rage

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**Abstract**

I will explore the narrative of female rage within theatre and popular culture through research regarding female criminals and creative interpretation of the play *Horse Girls* by Jenny Rachel Weiner. Through these avenues I will find how theatre that reflects the experience of the violent and angry female reflects a greater societal rage. I will use research regarding the “poison women” of Japan, specifically the female murders Takahashi Oden and Abe Sada, to reveal a greater societal preoccupation with female violence and rage. I will connect *Horse Girls* to *Medea* by Euripedes, and compare the two main characters: Ashleigh and Medea, respectively. Synthesizing this knowledge, I intend to use this thesis as a vehicle for exploration of the female experience not as it directly relates to the male experience but rather as it relates to society as a patriarchal, conceptual force. Specifically, I am interested in how the female experience as depicted through theatre can be used as a tool to describe, uphold, or condemn the current culture. Revealing the necessity of theatre and theatre education, especially for young girls, I conclude that catharsis is necessary for a functioning society, and the narrative of female rage within theatre is essential to society’s well-being.

## Introduction

Takahashi Oden and Abe Sada, Medea, and Ashleigh are all from wildly different worlds but are united in two major ways. First, the rules that they are bound by are similar in their restrictiveness: you cannot be too smart, too mean, too sexual, or too much of anything. They all transgress the boundaries of their respective worlds, from the smallest social folly to the final transgression of murder. Second, the deep rage they all possess transcends any differences in age, ethnicity, or time period. These four women burn from the inside out, and the meltdown as observed by the audience acts as the ultimate warning. If a woman is too much, she cannot be happy for long. The boundaries she attempts to transgress- whether it is the sexual and social boundaries of 1800s Japan or the physical boundaries of a preteen bedroom in Florida- will press back in with equal force, suffocating her in the end. I argue that these women are killers like any other, but the unnatural vision of a woman killing creates a unique phenomenon that captures the attention of entire communities. There is ultimately no escape. A hunger for more in life leads to inevitable condemnation, and these four women will not go quietly. There is no losing for these women, but their communities will ensure they do not win in any way. Their narratives of “deviation from conventional morality [are] cited as the source of delinquency” - as if it is their difference that makes them innately evil; therefore, this manipulation “works to shore up conventional morality as normative” and uphold social status quo as not only proper, but essential for functional living (120).

## Poison Women

*Poison Woman: Figuring Female Transgression in Modern Japanese Culture* by Christine L. Marran provides a focus on what exactly draws us as a society into the narrative of the female criminal. This book provides anecdotal evidence of society's preoccupation with women who do not fit the category of woman. The poison woman, conceptualized and popularized around the 1870s in Japan, is an iconic genre of fiction based on real stories of female criminals from that time period. These stories acted as fables insofar as they carried a moral lesson; if you act like these women, you will meet a similar horrible fate. There are over twenty poison woman narratives, but the two that are compelling to me are Takahashi Oden and Abe Sada. Oden and Sada are the clearest examples of how exactly these narratives are windows into society.

Takahashi Oden, beheaded in 1879 for a murder she claims was revenge, is arguably the most iconic of all of the “poison women.” Her crime was explained through pseudoscience that effectively placed the reason for her criminality within her actual physiognomic makeup. The results of her autopsy were published, and so called abnormalities like “an excessive amount of fatty tissue” were manipulated into scientific evidence that Oden’s criminality was literally a physical affliction (Marran 14).

This assertion was seen as accurate at the time: as Oden’s story was being dissected and devoured, a fascination with sex and a rise in literature regarding sex and sexual difference powered this preoccupation with this sexually different and therefore devious woman. These “books of nature” represented a new interest in sex and a new need to be properly educated regarding the dangers of engaging in the wrong kind of sexual activity. In tandem with the

popularity of poison woman stories and the emphasis within the stories on sexuality being linked to criminality, these new sexological texts proved powerful tools in furthering the agenda to paint female desire as an aberration.

Oden represents the pre-war notion of an unruly, violent women: a representation of exactly what not to do. From her childhood boisterousness, to her attitude surrounding money, to even her physical body -all are markers of her deviance. She tells us who we are by showing us who we are not. Her “sexuality and gender deviance [is] a symptom of an essentially perverse nature, which manifests itself in the body”, effectively cementing Oden’s place as the other (15). It is not only the murder that sets her apart from the proper image of a woman within society. After her first husband died, Oden began to invest in silk and other money making ventures. The murder takes place under the guise of convincing the merchant Goto Kichizo to invest in the silk trade; she asserts later that the reason is avenging her sister’s death. Oden’s business practices and her pursuit of financial gain and independence is transgressive in this time period. Instead of mourning, going home to her family, or finding another man, Oden throws herself into her business.

Oden is a powerful warning against the dangers of transgression, whether it be physical or emotional. In *Demon’s Tale*, the sensationalized story of Oden’s life, a final illustration depicts a group of women reading similar poison woman stories; this image represents the importance of “[internalizing] the lessons of the crime story” she is reading in order not to succumb to a similar life of “bad living and dissolute behavior” as a result of similar behavior to Oden’s- that is to say sexual deviance and aggressiveness (13). The manipulation of facts regarding Oden’s specific physiological makeup proved “an opportunity to settle the political

position of women once and for all” by not allowing her narrative to be holistic but rather simply corporeal; in her isolation “as abject, inhuman, and grotesque”, an audience understands that to be different is a death sentence (24). Oden has no room to tell her own story-her body has already told the authorities what they need to know.

The poison woman narrative shifts dramatically after WWII in terms of its place within popular consciousness. A reviled figure becomes a fetishized one, as the nation grapples with a new order of things. The anxieties of the national body are transferred into the obsession of a transgressively sexual female body (Marran 111). Abe Sada, a maid at the Yoshidaya inn, murders her lover in 1936. The murder is messy and brutal; the motive is entrenched in Sada’s sexual desire. Her victim is her illicit lover, Ishida, and the week before the murder is one spent “making love or drinking”; Sada is almost a perfect representation of an abhorrent poison woman. The inciting incident that leads to Ishida’s murder is his suggestion that he return to his wife, to which Sada explodes in anger. After she kills Ishida, she writes a proclamation of their undying love in his blood and basically signs her name to the crime.

Sada, who is subject to physical and mental study to determine biological or physiological cause for her murder, is defined by her appetite. Her infidelity, her sexual deviance and her inappropriate level of sexual desire intersect in the larger cultural narrative to paint a picture of a monstrous woman. The nature of her crime only adds to the shocking and sensational story- “the mingling of bodily fluids, the spilling of the victim’s blood, the inscription of the assailant’s name on the victim’s skin with a knife, the dismemberment of his body” are details that hold the public with equal parts horror and fascination. It is unfathomable to see a woman get so messy.

Unlike Oden's sensationalized narrative, Sada serves as a different kind of warning to the women of Japan. Where Oden was condemned because of her physical deviance, Sada is condemned for her mental deviance. The police report "frames her as a lascivious creature on the prowl," painting her sexual desire and appetite as the reason behind her act of extreme violence (109). There is no mention of her years of sexual abuse as a geisha, her condemnation in society because of her sex work, or her "vain attempts to have a sustained relationship" because those facts would allow her to be a victim of her circumstance (110). Instead, all of her misfortune and faults come from the deep disturbance within her psyche. Sada is a powerful warning in this post-war period, as her story is manipulated into a "manifestation of the potential for dangerous behavior in every woman", a representation of the potential of all women to be deviant, greedy, and transgressive (112).

*Poison Woman* explores femininity as a conscious or unconscious weapon, and how exactly it is weaponized and used as a manipulative tool. The villainous woman provides the foil to the virtuous woman. She gives instruction on what is forbidden, therefore illuminating what is allowed. The female who engages in forbidden, illegal, and immoral activities as defined by the overarching society present a threat to that society's sense of normalcy and control. ties as defined by the overarching society present a threat to that society's sense of normalcy and control. These immoral women also act as a reflection of the society they transgress, they are "symbolically central to how a society describes itself" through their status as outsiders of that society (xvii). This is to say that the villainous woman narrative allows society to define itself by what it isn't- or at least what it pretends not to be. With this research in mind, I will connect

fictional characters with these real women in an attempt to paint a picture of female emotion as it relates to society as a larger concept.

### **Horse Girls**

*Horse Girls*, by Jenny Rachel Weiner, centers around the Lady Jean Ladies, a group of preteen girls who meet and discuss, with all seriousness, their love and passion for horses. The group is complicated: there are dues to be paid, a detailed club song, and everyone has a specific rank. The play takes place during a meeting at Club President Ashleigh's house. She is rich- she owns all of the horses the girls ride. She is popular- the girls fawn over her, rushing to braid her hair, extolling her virtues, and attempting to gain her favor so they can be socially elevated by proxy. During this meeting, the girls discover that the horses are to be sold off and killed for meat. Ashleigh devises a plan to escape, painting a grand picture of the adventure of riding away into the night. When it is revealed that the rest of the girls have decided not to follow her, she kills two of them in a frenzy, stabbing one with a trophy she got from horse riding, and strangling the other with her own braid.

I consider Ashleigh's story in *Horse Girls* to be similar to *Medea* by Euripedes. Her rage, hurt, and desire for violence immediately made me think of the Greek tragedy. However, where Medea grapples with her decisions profoundly and then ultimately decides to embrace violence as a means to an end, Ashleigh acts on impulse, striking wildly at whoever is unlucky enough to be near her. They are both wounded and betrayed in ways that cut deeply within their own experiences. For both Ashleigh and Medea, the ones who said they would stay with them forever have left for good.

## Medea

Medea is one of the most revered and reviled characters in all of literature, not only classics. Her intelligence, drive, and apparent reverence of violence set her apart from the regular woman. She is consciously transgressive: every word she says is abnormal, every action pushes boundaries, and her final act of violence is incomprehensible. A mother killing her child is the most wicked and unnatural act; Medea kills both of her sons in order to make a statement about the way she has been treated. Female experience aside, Medea is a killer.

From the beginning, it is clear that Medea is a woman in pain. The entire first section of the play, before we even see Medea, is all about the suffering that has befallen her because of her husband Jason's betrayal - his new marriage into royalty- and her ultimate isolation. In conversation the chorus of Corinthian women, Medea's character is clearly and concisely represented within this passage:

Do you see what I suffer, though I bound  
 My accursed husband with great oaths?  
 May I one day see him with his bride  
 Pounded to nothing, house and all,  
 Since they dare to wrong me unprovoked.  
 O father, o city, how shamefully I left you,  
 I, the killer of my brother. (161-167)

She is at once the suffering wife, the vengeful woman, and the isolated foreigner. Her multiplicity is exciting and unnerving. A woman who wishes for her enemies to be “pounded to nothing” within the first 200 lines of a play is a woman to not take lightly. Throughout the play,

Medea shows intellectual motivation rather than physiological/sexual motivation. Her suffering is belittled as a betrayal just within her marital life, but I believe her pain comes from the entirety of the life she has been tricked into. It is not a life that she believes she deserves. Even though she frames it through the lense of revenge for Jason leaving her for someone else, her true motivation is revenge for all those who have made her feel humiliated and belittled. Her rage is born of her profound isolation from her homeland. She has been taken from her father, and deserted by her husband. She ultimately has nothing to keep her safe or grounded; she has nobody to tell her how to be.

Medea is different from women of that time- and arguably women today- in that she refuses to be shamed. Much of her decision making comes from her desire not to be ridiculed, laughed at, or dishonored by her enemies. Of her decision to kill her children she asserts: "let no one think of me as weak and submissive...but as a woman of a very different kind, dangerous to my enemies"(808-810). She does not intend to leave any trace of her " counsels of softness" and the thought of leaving her children behind as a symbol of her emotional weakness is unfathomable to her (1079). Medea also differs from most female villains in the calculations she takes in order to achieve her revenge. Her rage is bubbling but contained and unlike Ashleigh, she plans ahead so as not to get caught. Her pain and mistreatment aside- the nature of her evil is affronting because it is so purposeful and so internally modified. Her justification for killing her children develops through a monologue toward the end of the play; within that monologue the subtleties of the character of Medea as a representation of the vengeful mother and wife comes to light. She laments: "Alas! Alas! Why do you look at me like this, my children? Why do you smile this final smile of all? Aiai, what can I do?" (1040-1041) and then only a few lines later,

“Do I want to make myself more ridiculous by letting my enemies go unpunished? I must face the deed. Shame on my cowardice in even letting my mind dally with these weak thoughts” (1049-1051). Love for her children becomes cowardice in the face of revenge. Medea is adamant not to let classically female, motherly feelings cloud her from the calculated bloodshed she enacts. Allowing herself to stop the rollercoaster momentum of her fury for a minute of love and sadness is cause for “shame on [her] cowardice” and she immediately refocuses to the gruesome task at hand. Unlike the deaths of King Creon and his daughter, whom Medea views as key players in her misery, the deaths of her innocent children are direct and messy. She kills her children and you can hear it happen, most vividly when one child cries “where can I run to form my mother’s hands?” - an entirely different murder from the poison garments given to Creon and his daughter (1274-1275). The nature of the murder of her children is what catapults Medea into infamy. In “Crossing the Line in the Sand”, a short anecdotal story by Elissa Schappell, she describes a moment of anger towards her children, and her resulting fear of her own emotions, “[she] was terrified of what my anger might make [her] capable of” and the violence she can too easily imagine herself committing against her children- the most unthinkable crime (Schappell 195). Murdering children, specifically one’s own, is the most transgressive female behavior because it subverts the patriarchal view of a woman’s purpose: to bear a child and raise it into adulthood.

After the murders, Medea appears almost triumphant in her position above Jason in a chariot pulled by dragons. Her anger is transformative, but at the cost of her children’s lives. She has shed the label of wife and mother, floating above the story and above the repressive world below; Medea is no longer human. She is otherworldly, transformed, and most importantly a

symbol of what happens when you are a smart and angry woman. You are of “stone or iron” and every action you take against the norm will lead only to pain and death (1279-1280).

*Horse Girls* is similar to *Medea* because the story is larger than life in its emotional chaos. Ashleigh’s preteen anxiety and chaotic inner life coupled with her deep rage and hunger for power place her among many ancient Greek supervillains in terms of storytelling potential. Ancient Greek drama, rooted in ritual and religion, is characterized by the same emotional and energetic power that is present within *Horse Girls*. There is nothing subtle about Greek drama, and there is nothing subtle about Ashleigh.

## Directing Proposal

What is so satisfying about *Horse Girls* from a directing perspective is that we get to see a visual manifestation of rage and bloodlust on stage at the end of the play. The murders in *Medea*, although particularly descriptive for that time period, still happen off stage as is Greek tradition. Ashleigh's murders are gruesome and happen as the ultimate surprise- but the same anger is there. Both Medea and Ashleigh refuse to let the ones they love leave them. In the final moments of *Horse Girls*, the others plan to leave Ashleigh's house and abandon her dream of running away with the horses. Ashleigh, brandishing her prized horse-riding trophy above her head, screams that "NOBODY IS EVER LEAVING ME!" and desperately tries to keep everyone with her and keep her control over the group (38).

In the stage directions, a gruesome, deadly fight ensues:

*(ASHLEIGH flings the trophy in a way that is reckless and almost hits CAMILLE)*

*(TRISH jumps to push her out of the way, and physically gets in ASHLEIGH's face. There is a tussle.)*

*(ASHLEIGH, on instinct, slams the blunt base of the trophy into TRISH's skull.)*

*(Blood splatters everywhere.)*

*(all over the girls)*

*(all over the white room)*

*(TRISH falls dead to the floor) (38-39).*

This murder is a sharp turn from the farcical, harmless, and hysterical action of the play thus far. In my direction, I intend for this moment to be as realistic and horrible as possible. It is important for me that the audience sees how far Ashleigh can go. I want the audience to understand that

this is preteen girl is not just a crazy spoiled brat; Ashleigh's rage is deadly and a symbol of the rage in all women. Weiner has written a play that is extremely nostalgic up until this point- forcing the audience to consider the place this violence may have in their own emotional life. If one can relate to the girls and their fantasy, I want to ask the question of what else in this play resonates. I want to know where this violence lives within all of us.

The most important thing in my proposed production of *Horse Girls* is toeing the line between objective and subjective reality. I want the audience to begin in a place of comfort and slowly find themselves becoming more and more unsure if what they are seeing is objective. There are moments throughout the play, specifically the very beginning and the very end, that border on unreality. The girls reactions to the news of their horses being sold and murder is grotesquely exaggerated and exceedingly Greek; they're basically keening for their lost horses, the objects of their affection and obsession.

I believe it is important to pay close attention and take care of the beats in the script as they are written. Weiner is skillful in recreating the reality of teenage girls- the missteps, subtle attacks, and claustrophobia of the strange, strict social code. In an exchange between Ashleigh and two other girls:

TIFFANY: Camille, you're exaggerating-

ASHLEIGH: I own way more than one horse.

CAMILLE: She's lying-

ASHLEIGH: Excuse me?

*(beat)*

CAMILLE: I was talking about Tiffany. (Weiner 11)

It is reminiscent of wild animals in the way Ashleigh snaps and Camille retreats, quick to assuage and soothe the quick anger of the group leader. Throughout the entire play, the girls circle each other like wolves, ready to attack and react without thinking.

Konrad Lorenz, Austrian ethologist, relates animal behavior to human interaction in *On Aggression*. He argues that aggression and natural reactions to stimuli will manifest even in instances of repression. Long buried instinct will resurface even without the appropriate stimuli, and “it will be clear that the damming up of aggression will be more dangerous, the better the members of the group know, understand, and like each other”, which is undoubtedly the case in *Horse Girls* (Lorenz 52). These girls use their friendship as a weapon, wielding secrets and hurling insults that are effective because they hit so close to home. An example of this aggression can be seen towards the end of the play, when Ashleigh begins to exhibit unprecedented maniacal anger. Brandi, one of the members of the Lady Jean Ladies, stands up to Ashleigh, exclaiming: “just because YOU USED TO BE FAT doesn’t give you the right to treat us this way!” This jab, and the later accusation that Ashleigh has been making up her relationship with her hot older neighbor, are both secret shames in Ashleigh’s life that only a close friend would know (Weiner 39). Lorenz argues that without a “re-directed activity...the human being without insight has been known to kill his friend”, and I believe that this rings true for the female experience (Lorenz 53). Without any redirection or refocusing activity, there is no outlet for large and all-encompassing emotions like anger, sadness, and jealousy. These animalistic instincts, and the way they manifest within the dialogue between these girls, is so real and so painfully accurate. Teenagers are volatile, and I would argue girls are even more reactive

because of the societal pressure to keep it all inside. I believe Ashleigh is a perfect example of what happens when anger is not released in a productive way.

With the design of my proposed production of *Horse Girls* I want there to be no hint of the bloodshed to come. I hope for an atmosphere that becomes increasingly claustrophobic and sinister as the story goes on, but begins in a place of perfection, normality, and even fun. As we get deeper and deeper into the chaos and desperation, I want the lighting and sound design to reflect that there is something volatile bubbling under the sterile exterior.

The set, Ashleigh's bedroom, is impeccably kept and disconcertingly mature for a 12 year old girl. I want the set to reflect the controlled universe that has been imposed upon Ashleigh. In the script, Weiner calls for sleek white furniture, white carpet, and a white chest of drawers or trophy case that is the most imposing and emphasized feature on set. The world of the play is fuzzy, and the audience isn't sure what is in Ashleigh's head and what is in reality. Everything in her bedroom is white and clean, save for the karaoke machine, the phone, and the journals. These three items are small cracks in the facade of adulthood that Ashleigh tries to keep up. They are all integral to the story and should reflect their relative with bright, exaggerated colors. The phone is a huge indicator of her wealth, as she uses it to call down to her nanny multiple times. It gives her status and lets her exercise a sense of control. The karaoke machine provides the score for the play. It should be responsible for producing the sound for the songs the girls sing, save for the last moment of the play in Ashleigh's fantasy. The journals are symbolic of the club itself- they represent a community that is as obsessive about horses as Ashleigh is. For costumes and makeup, I envision that they're wearing school uniforms. The unifying attire is the perfect way to get kids to compete as sneakily as possible. Subtle markers of expression can

be shown through colorful socks, charm bracelets, makeup that is garish and probably a tad too heavy, and hair accessories. Aesthetically I want it to feel as if individuality and imagination are creeping through small cracks within the sterile and clean and rich atmosphere.

## Conclusion

I believe that theatre that depicts enraged women is the ideal method of catharsis in a world that otherwise forbids that healthy and normal release. All four narratives I have explored are not stories of idealistic or admirable women; at the end of the day they are all murderers. However, I also believe that a sense of humanity within these characters is powerful for female audience members to observe; what resonates for me so strongly with these characters is how clearly they express their wants. A woman who wants is dangerous, a woman who pursues her wants is deadly. The dramatic tool of violence in *Medea* and *Horse Girls* proves cathartic for our deepest rage. I feel for Medea in her isolation; I feel for Ashleigh in her fear. In a selection of *Poetics* by Aristotle, catharsis is explained as necessary for a society to work. Like oil to a rusted joint, tragedy pulls out the thing in us that would otherwise fester. In the safety of the “imitation not only of a complete action, but of events inspiring fear or pity... [catharsis] is best produced when the events come on us by surprise; and the effect is heightened when, at the same time, they follows as cause and effect” and enact a teaching moment, a feeling moment that can provide a proper release of emotion without the result of violence, poor judgement, and pain (Butcher). Using what I have learned in my reading of *Medea*, my creative work surrounding *Horse Girls*, and my research regarding poison women and their place in society, I want to facilitate theatre-making for young girls.

I want to direct *Horse Girls* because I am obsessed with the inner emotional life of preteen girls. I remember my own experiences growing up, and I am awestruck at the intensity and irrationality of it. It seems like everything matters so much, while everyone is telling you it's not a big deal. People treat you like you're crazy. You begin to feel like you might actually be. *Horse Girls* is written like it is a comedy, an over-the-top farce that is intentionally ridiculous and shallow. While I do think it is ridiculous (and funny), I also believe there is something profound in the way that these girls navigate- however unsuccessfully- the complex social and emotional world they have created. This play is a mirror: it reflects back those aspects of being human that nobody wants to see-least of all from a woman, and least of all from a teenage girl.

Through performance and open discussion about emotions and expression, I believe the female experience can be better understood through the lens of Ashleigh's experience I want young girls and women to use theatre as a vehicle for expression of those "improper" emotions like rage and jealousy so they can know that their inner life is normal, necessary, and worthy of being heard.

In the National Educational Longitudinal Survey, conducted by James S. Catterall and Richard Chapleau, students were observed over a period of 10 years, in order to determine the effects of music and theatre on development. Although the complexity of theatre allows for less specific evidence correlating arts to positive social development, there are a multitude of studies that point to growth in language faculty and social skills coming directly from involvement in theatre. Students who were involved in theatre reported a greater "self concept", relating a better sense of self esteem and understanding that only grew as they got older (Catterall, Chapleau 17).

Theatre is the way to understand yourself, others, and the world around you. Participating in theatre and storytelling fosters greater empathy and emotional intelligence. The stories we tell are warnings, parables, and powerful tools that tell us how to be and how to act. I believe that thoughtful storytelling, coupled with discussion and education, can act as a force propelling us toward a greater understanding of ourselves. Hurt, rage, and the impulse for violence are all parts of the human experience. Arguably, these feelings are more intense for those who have been socialized as female because they are told that it is improper to express anything close to irritation. Ashleigh acts as a tragic warning of what can happen when a deep emotional life is ignored and repressed; she can also be used to take agency over the narrative of female rage, villainy, and violence. Although the world of *Horse Girls* can be interpreted as satirical and farcical, I believe there is a deep truth in the way that Ashleigh interacts with the other girls and with the outside world.

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