

Medea, Shulie, and Myth

Medea: an icon of Greek mythology and tragedy, a witch most famous for murdering her children. Shulamith Firestone: a radical, revolutionary feminist activist and icon most readily remembered for her solitary death.

When reduced solely to their endings, these women appear to be tragic characters. When their whole stories are taken into account, however, a broader picture emerges: that of two women whose lives take on the stuff of legend and myth, and whose very names conjure fantastic images, emotions, and potential.

The Myth of Medea

Greek mythology tells us that Medea was born in Colchis, the daughter of King Aeetes and Idyia, a water nymph. She was renowned throughout the ancient world for her skills in sorcery and witchcraft. This may partially be on account of her family—she was the niece of Circe, goddess of magic, and the granddaughter of Helios, the god of the Sun.

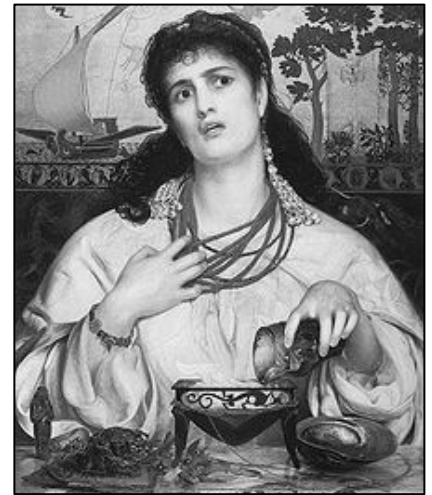
Jason was the son of Aeson, the King of Iolcus. After Aeson's death Jason's uncle Pelias seized the throne of Iolcus. Intending to send Jason on a suicide mission, Pelias tasked him with a quest to capture the Golden Fleece—a magical piece of ram's fleece that symbolized power and authority. Jason assembled a team of Argonauts and set out to Colchis, home of the Golden Fleece and of Medea.

Through the divine intervention of the goddess Hera, who sought to punish Pelias for his disobedience, Jason met Medea on Colchis, and the two fell in love. Medea agreed to help Jason on his quest for the Golden Fleece on the condition that he would take her away from Colchis.

In order to capture the Golden Fleece, Medea helped Jason complete three tasks—tasks that would have been otherwise impossible. Medea used her magical abilities to outsmart her father, Aeetes, and help Jason survive fire-breathing oxen, an army that sprung from the ground, and an ever-awake dragon guarding the fleece.

After Jason captured the Golden Fleece, he and Medea fled from Colchis aboard the *Argo*. In order to slow down Aeetes, who was quickly pursuing them, Medea murdered her brother Absyrtus, chopped him up into pieces, and dropped the pieces into the sea. As Medea expected, Aeetes stopped the chase to collect the pieces of his son and give him a proper burial, allowing Jason and Medea to escape.

On their journey Medea continued her efforts to work on Jason's behalf, ruthlessly and fiercely advocating for her husband; among her other triumphs, she convinced Pelias' children to murder him, allowing Jason to claim the crown. The couple then fled to Corinth, where they raised their



Medea by Anthony Frederick Augustus Sandys

two children in relative peace. That is, until Jason met the daughter of Creon, King of Corinth, and arranged with Creon to marry her, ending his relationship to Medea.

It is at this point that the plot of Euripides' *Medea* begins.

The Myth of Shulie

Shulamith “Shulie” Firestone was born January 7, 1945 in Ottawa, Canada, but grew up in St. Louis. Her parents converted to Orthodox Judaism later in life, and were very strict in their observance of the religion's tenets. As such, Shulie often got into arguments with her family, especially her father, when she exhibited behaviors that went against their interpretation of Orthodox law.

Shulie moved to Chicago to attend college at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, earning a BFA in Painting. While there, she was the subject of a documentary film entitled *Shulie*, that featured interviews with Shulie, as well as a critique session in which her male professors ruthlessly criticized her work. While living in Chicago, Shulie and a group of fellow feminists attended the 1967 National Conference for a New Politics. There was no major legislation about women's issues, so Shulie's group drafted their own and tried to present it at the conference. However, the all-male panel shut them out. When Shulie attempted to speak to them, a man patted her on the head and told her that the conference had more important things to worry about than women's issues. In response, Shulie formed her first official feminist organization: the Westside Group. This collective was known as the first independent women's group organized to advocate for women's issues since the suffrage era.



Portrait Photo of Shulie

After graduation, Shulie moved to New York City, where she became even more actively involved in organized feminist movements. She went on to found three major feminist organizations while living in New York. Her first was the New York Radical Women, followed by the Redstockings, as a member of which she co-authored the influential *Notes from the First Year* and the *Redstockings Manifesto*. Shulie also founded the New York Radical Feminists. With NYRF, Shulie led an abortion speak-out advocating for a woman's right to choose—an intensely revolutionary act at the time. The group also protested the Miss America pageant, among other causes. In 1970 she published her seminal text *The Dialectic of Sex*. Friends from this time describe Shulie as fiery, passionate, and as having total conviction in her beliefs.

Eventually, though, Shulie's life began to take a dark turn. She left all of the groups she founded, and hid from her friends. Her brother Daniel committed suicide in 1974; he was awarded full Orthodox rites at his burial, as the family consistently denied that Daniel committed suicide. Because of this, Shulie refused to attend the funeral. In 1977 Shulie's parents moved to Israel,

prompting Shulie to return to St. Louis to collect her personal belongings. She got into a major fight with her father, who threatened to disown her. Beating him to the punch, Shulie wrote a letter disowning both her father and mother for what she perceived as their wrongdoings. She closed the letter in mythic fashion: “Be grateful that you will not have the madness of this daughter as well to atone, for hereby I DISSOLVE MY TIES OF BLOOD.”

It was at this point that things took a turn for the worse. Shulie had developed schizophrenia, but her brother’s death and her disownment of her parents led her condition to devolve into full-blown psychosis. In 1987 Shulie’s sister Laya checked her into a clinic after receiving a call from Shulie’s landlord—she had been wandering the streets, screaming into the night, and panhandling. This began a period of multiple hospitalizations for Shulie, and she never forgave Laya for causing the first one. In 1998, Shulie published her second major work, *Airless Spaces*, an autobiographical collection of short stories about “losers in the East Village,” institutionalization, and mental illness that was clearly connected to Shulie’s life, and that some say is really about Shulie’s own struggles with mental illness.

The public did not hear from Shulie again until 2012, when her landlord discovered her dead in her apartment in the East Village of Manhattan. We can only speculate at her cause of death, as Shulie’s family gave her a full Orthodox burial, and thus no autopsy was ever performed. At her memorial service, Shulie’s brother Ezra spoke, lamenting the fact that Shulie never married or had children. Her sister Tirzah, however, stood up and corrected Ezra, saying:

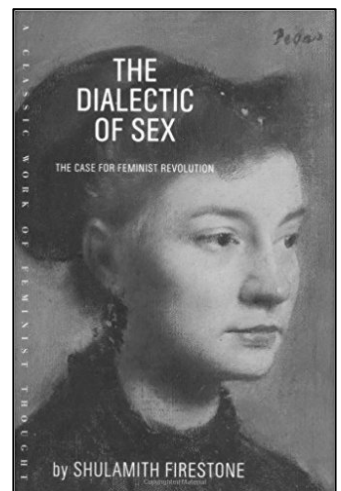
“Excuse me, but with all due respect, Shulie was a model for Jewish women and girls everywhere. She had children—she influenced thousands of women to have new thoughts, to lead new lives. I am who I am, and a lot of women are who they are, because of Shulie.”

The Lasting Legacy of Shulie

Tirzah was right. Shulie influenced thousands of women to redefine their worldviews. Not only that, but Shulie’s thoughts and ideas changed the world, forever. Many of Shulie’s most “radical” ideas and concepts espoused in *The Dialectic of Sex*, the ideas that got Shulie labeled as extreme, are now being incorporated into mainstream theory and practice. And yet, Shulie’s name is rarely mentioned.

In an article for *The Atlantic*, Emily Chertoff defines specific examples of this phenomenon:

“When parents choose to raise their children gender-neutral, a lot of that’s Firestone. When we hail advances in artificial reproduction, we’re seeing developments that Firestone championed decades ago. When writers theorize about the end of men, they’re tearing whole pages out of Firestone’s book. We know how Gurley Brown influenced us. Yet we know nothing about Firestone.”



The Dialectic of Sex
By Shulamith Firestone

Shulie coined the term “the personal is political.” She advocated for a dissolution of traditional gender roles. She believed children should be treated with respect, and not as lesser-class citizens. She believed that groups of people in any form of social organization (be it male/female, male/male, female/female/ larger groups, etc.) were capable of raising children. She questioned modern conceptions of love. She called out oppressive patriarchal structures that benefit straight white cis-gendered men over other groups.

Her ideas have influenced nearly every facet of our modern society. While she is given little to no credit in most mainstream circles, Shulie’s theories and ideas have been influential in shaping our world.

Re-defining the Myths

Both Medea and Shulie were powerful, intelligent, angry, passionate, intense women. They were women whose presence sometimes seemed too big for their societies to handle. While the myth of Medea has resonated across thousands of years, Shulie’s story (which takes on a mythical quality of its own) is, unfortunately, rarely told. And when both these stories *are* told, it is the ending we pay the most attention to. Medea murders her children. Shulie dies alone in her apartment. The narrative plays out that their ends were tragic and inescapable—the defining characteristics of their stories.

What if we could re-define these endings, examining them through not a patriarchal lens, but a feminist one? A lens that celebrates the power, the agency, the necessity, and the triumph of these women? What if the stories of Medea and Shulie were told as an act of activism, allowing women to come together and lift each other up? What if a group of women could use these stories to create a space for their rage?

Why are the stories of Medea and Shulie consistently told as tragedies?

They don’t have to be.