

“Cave of the Heart,” The Medea of Martha Graham and Isamu Noguchi: Twentieth-Century Classical Reception in the Visual and Performing Arts

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ABSTRACT

Martha Graham dominated the modern dance scene as choreographer and dancer for much of the twentieth century and many of her pieces were inspired by Greek myth (Kisselgoff 1991, Yaari 2003). This article discusses Graham's interpretation of the figure of Medea in her 1947 dance piece, "Cave of the Heart," with the aim of familiarizing classicists with a compelling new version of Medea. Using only four dancers (Jason, Medea, The Princess, and The Chorus), and working in collaboration with the sculptor and set designer, Isamu Noguchi, Graham creates a more-than-human figure of Medea in new ways made possible by visual media (Tracy 2001). Noguchi's "wearable" sculpture, variously resembling a "spider dress" or "the sun," and Graham's costume / prop, consisting of a long, thin strip of snake-like material that Medea pulls from and returns to her breast, transform Medea into a twentieth-century figure, both familiar and new. Getting to know a non-verbal Medea, created by a choreographer known for her powerful female figures (Bannerman 2010, Thoms 2012, Franko 2012) with the collaboration of a sculptor interested in movement, challenges us, as classicists, to see how the visual and performance arts re-envision the Medea we thought we knew.