Introduction

Even if it is likely that Euripides was the first dramatist to make Medea murder her children, there are plenty of other murders to her name.[1] She slaughtered her brother and scattered his remains into the Black Sea, she was involved in the murder of Jason's uncle, Pelias, and finally killed Creon and his daughter, Jason's new wife. Yet in Christa Wolf's *Medea* she is absolved of all these crimes.[2] The narrator, in a brief introductory section, assumes a tone of insistent moral authority, justifying her desire to reopen the secrets of the past by reference to the afflictions of the present: 'Das Eingeständnis unserer Not, damit müßten wir anfangen' (9). (We should start with the admission of our distress.) The narrator makes the astonishing assertion that the Ancient Greeks are 'fremde Gäste, uns gleich' (9) (strange guests who are like ourselves) and that Medea's age is one which speaks more clearly to us than others. Thus the 'erwünschte Begegnung' (desired encounter) with Medea will not only expose how sorely she has been misjudged, a misrepresentation perpetuated by the myths, but will also confront us with our own processes of misjudgement and self-deceit.

There follow eleven dramatic monologues by six characters, which convey how the woman Medea has been made the scapegoat for crimes of the state. Medea discovers that Creon's assertion of power and wealth rests upon the sacrifice of his daughter. Against the wishes of a faction in which his wife Merope has a strong voice, Creon rejects a plan to marry Iphinoe to a neighbouring king, who would in future be his heir, thereby forging an alliance which would bring Corinth increased security. Instead he murders Iphinoe to consolidate his position, and encourages the incapacitating neurotic illness of his second daughter, Glauke, who has repressed all knowledge of what has occurred. In order to sustain the public lie that Iphinoe's disappearance is due to her marriage to a foreign prince, Medea's knowledge is invalidated by defaming her and casting her in the role of criminal. Thus the rumour begins that she murdered her brother, Absyrtos. But we then learn from her monologue that he was in fact killed for similar reasons;

her father Aietes 'sacrificed' him in order to retain power in the face of opposition to his incompetence and greed, which included the opposition of his wise wife and daughters. Thus Medea's conflict is not only portrayed as the individual against the state, but as a gendered struggle in which men's humanity is diminished by their lust for power and wealth, and women fall victim to male arrogance and pride. This conflict is further inflected by the Colchians' immigrant status, and the way in which the threat that Medea poses as a woman not willing to conform to oppressive Corinthian values can be countered by official encouragement of xenophobia.

As is clear from the narrator's 'Eingeständnis unserer Not' (9) (admission of our distress) and the themes of state power, murder, gender and immigration, Wolf's text, first published in 1996, can be viewed as a contemporary feminist critique of German, and more broadly, of western values. As Helen King comments, for Wolf, the Greeks

> are 'our strange guests who are like ourselves', but their philosophical dualism is also to blame for getting us into the fine mess which is 20th-century Europe . . . Her aim is to confront 'the corpse in the cellar', as Germany comes to terms with its Nazi past, with its division after 1945 and its recent reunification, and with the presence in the country of immigrant communities. More generally, she is concerned with the way our reconstructions of the past act to suppress our knowledge of what has made us who we are. The 'blind spot' she detects in Western civilisation, the catalyst of moral breakdown, is the conflict between 'Thou shalt not kill' and the consent given by societies to judicial execution and war.[3]

King praises this 'cogent and impressive novel';[4] it undeniably touches upon important issues. Wolf's project involves examining the way in which questions of gender, national and cross-cultural identity are interlinked, and how the discourses affect and even sustain each other. Fictional representation remains potentially the most radical medium for exploring and confronting the relationship of individual and corporate identity and for revealing the way in which identity is often perceived and expressed as incoherent or contradictory. 'Free *from* . . . artists must still render themselves free *for* . . .'[5] By creatively incorporating the freedom for ambiguity, irresolution and irony, fiction can revolt against normative or totalizing explanation, be that in the form of feminist theory, historical analysis or literary criticism. Indeed, in dialogue with the fictional interrogation of historical and personal experience, such explanatory disciplines are themselves challenged by the need to account for textual ambiguity or unresolved conflict.

It is the themes approached by Wolf, those of female identity and how it interlinks with the field of national identity at the level of the individual woman, which form the basis of my analysis. The conceptual linking of the

two is crucial. Feminist theories have long been concerned with the roots of female identity, wherein its difference to male identity lies, how it can be expressed in a language that is male, or whether there is such a thing at all. In varying degrees (and with the obvious exception of essentialist theorists) feminists have emphasized the historical roots of identity, arguing that identity is historically specific and therefore variable, and that gender is linked with questions of national identity, ethnicity and class. Similarly, the term 'national identity' remains much discussed. There are those who hold the view that national identity is based on essential characteristics or qualities that remain stable through time, a view that usually corresponds to an essentializing notion of ethnicity. More suggestive definitions of national identity are those which hold it to be constructed, a myth or creation that frequently has ascribed to it foundational value. As Mary Fulbrook makes clear, however, the 'constructionist' approach is far from uniform:

> Broadly, one may say that [Ernest] Gellner, [Benedict] Anderson and [Eric] Hobsbawm each focus on different aspects of changing conditions in 'modernity': the social processes concomitant on industrialization (Gellner); the emergence of 'print capitalism' which allowed a broadening of the 'imagined community' (Anderson); and the state system of modern capitalism (Hobsbawm). Their contribution has been to focus attention on the substantive conditions under which, historically, conceptions of the nation could emerge and develop in the last two centuries.[6]

The emphasis on the concept of nation as constructed has led to interesting debates about the relationship between nation and literature. Far from being an innocent medium of representation, literature, and particularly the novel, has played a decisive role in creating and consolidating the sense of a national community. As Timothy Brennan argues:

> Nations, then, are imaginary constructs that depend for their existence on an apparatus of cultural fictions in which imaginative literature plays a decisive role. And the rise of European nationalism coincides especially with one form of literature – the novel . . . It was the novel that historically accompanied the rise of nations by objectifying the 'one, yet many' of national life, and by mimicking the structures of the nation, a clearly bordered jumble of languages and styles.[7]

Clearly, both female and national identity have been the subject of considerable interdisciplinary study: my interest in this book is to examine the way in which national identity manifests itself at the individual level and how it relates to female identity; the way in which the two identities are shown to interact and inflect each other; and the critical response invited by the text.[8] It is not my purpose here, however, to draw on the explosion of non-literary work on identity, but to focus on the contribution that

fictional works can make to how we understand and interrogate identity. Thus my project is unashamedly literary in its emphasis, rather than being emphatically 'interdisciplinary' in approach. There is a reason for this. When the study of literature is incorporated into a broader, cultural-studies approach to a theme, it can too easily become part of a body of evidence within a general study of an issue; the literary text's function becomes illustrative and it is presented as a mirror of specific kinds of sociopolitical and historical context. Such studies are valuable, for of course literature is written at a particular time under particular conditions. However, by concentrating closely on narrative texts I hope to demonstrate that prose fiction can offer an understanding of identity that is qualitatively different from definitions of identity reached through theoretical and historical analysis. The fictional exploration of the relationship between female and national identity is potentially so fruitful because such a portrayal need not function in the service of an argument. It can, through the creative interchange of plot, narrative voice, perspective and language, both construct and challenge preconceptions, and can variously and actively depict contradiction in a way that analytical discourses (historical and theoretical) too often cannot or do not. The devices of narrative fiction facilitate the depiction of the complex nature of identity; the way in which it can shift in relation to context is often constructed on the basis of opposition and how it manifests itself through contradictory desires and emotions. Narrative fiction can itself be contradictory or ambiguous in its representation, while yet making contradiction and ambiguity a subject of exploration. Representations that allow for such complexity then serve both to extend and to complicate the way in which identity, whether individual female or national, must be understood.

However, in Wolf's *Medea* there is unfortunately no such challenge posed to our understanding of identity. By eschewing ambiguity in favour of idealization, Wolf has transformed the woman implicated in at least six murders to a vehicle for all she values. Whereas the interest and challenge of Euripides' *Medea* resides precisely in the portrayal of a woman who elicits sympathy because she is wronged, but whose anger is then horrific even to herself, Wolf rejects a figure who could both encompass and provoke such ambivalent emotions. Instead her protagonist is very much as Leukon describes her: 'das unschuldige Opfer, frei . . . von innerem Zwiespalt' (206) (the innocent victim, free . . . of inner conflict). The characters are largely structured around polarities of good or bad, innocent or manipulative, thus reproducing a crass dualism that is absent in Euripides: 'der Riß [ging] nicht durch sie, sondern [klaffte] zwischen ihr und jenen, die sie

verleumdet, verurteilt hatten' (206). (The rift did not run through her, but gaped between her and those who had slandered and condemned her.)

So Medea becomes the perfect woman; wild (10), proud (19), beautiful (42), witty (47), assured and knowing. In Colchis she was known as 'die guten Rat Wissende' (55) (the woman of good council); she comprehends and sees through people's relationships and power structures to which others are blind. Thus Jason admits, 'Zu hoch für mich, all diese schwierigen verborgenen Zusammenhänge' (45) (all of these difficult, hidden connections are too elevated for me), and even Akamas appears dimwitted in comparison: 'Warum, konnte sie fragen, warum gibt es diese zwei Kreons. Der eine steif im Thronsaal, der andere locker bei Tisch, wenn wir unter uns sind. Mir war nie der Gedanke gekommen, daß es anders sein könnte' (111). (Why, she could ask, why are there these two Creons. The one sits stiff in his throne room, the other relaxed at the table when we are together by ourselves. It had never occurred to me that it could be different.) In relation to Glauke, Medea becomes the skilled therapist who encourages the princess to confront what she has repressed, and more generally she advocates the free-play of emotions, presumably with the assumption that emotions are always positive: 'Ach Leukon, sagt sie, du nimmst deine Gefühle mit deinen Gedanken gefangen. Laß sie doch einfach frei' (155). (Oh Leukon, she said, you allow your ideas to imprison your feelings. Just let them free.) Certainly in her case, there are no destructive emotions in the first place and no desire for revenge on Jason since 'Es hat so kommen müssen' (48). (It had to be this way.)

This dazzling Medea dominates the characterization of the other main figures. Jason is a weak misogynist who has forgotton the wisdom and healing arts taught to him by Cheiron to become a despicable, abuse-hurling ruffian: 'Wir sollen die Weiber nehmen. Wir sollen ihren Widerstand brechen' (202). (We should take the women. We should break their resistance.) Agameda hates Medea because Medea never showed her enough love; Akamas is the arch-manipulator who admires Medea but recognizes the threat she poses to the prevailing system; Glauke is the neurotic victim whose final act of dissent, hurling herself down the palace well, is a refusal to conform to the role expected of her as Jason's new wife, and whose sudden strength of resolve is due to the affection and help Medea gave her. Only Leukon arouses more interest as a character, aware of and appalled by the actions of Creon and Akamas, but keeping silent, accepting his marginalization as astronomer without political influence and increasingly withdrawing from court in order to survive.

This schematization does not only apply to the main characters. Thus those individuals who are loyal friends of Medea are as exceptional as she is. Lyssa, Medea's companion from Colchis, exemplifies female loyalty and uncloying motherliness. She leaves Colchis with Medea, leaving behind the man she loved, cares for Medea and her sons, shows admirable common sense in times of crisis and goes into exile with Medea. In Leukon's words, 'Sie gehört zu den Frauen, die die Erde wieder anstoßen würden, falls sie einmal stehenbleiben sollte, sie hält das Leben der Menschen, die ihr anvertraut sind, fest in den Händen, man kann jeden beneiden, der in ihrer Obhut aufwachsen darf' (163). (She is one of those women who would start the world turning again, should it ever stand still; she holds the life of the people who are entrusted to her firmly in her hands. One can envy those who are allowed to grow up in her care.) Oistros, the man who rescued Medea from the pursuing crowds and who becomes her lover, is the perfect man with all the right fairytale credentials. An orphan of humble origin, he was adopted by a childless family, was trained as a stonemason by his adopted father, whom he soon overtook in skill, and is now a sought-after artist who is influenced by neither money nor power: 'Geld scheint so wenig an ihm zu haften wie Neid, dafür ist er ein Menschenfänger, immer ist er umgeben von jungen Leuten' (151). (Money seems to make as little impression on him as envy, but instead he attracts people and is always surrounded by the young.) His presence has a healing effect, and 'Sein Gleichmut und seine Unabhängigkeit strahlen auf jeden aus, der zu ihm kommt, ob hoch oder niedrig' (151). (His equanimity and independence shine on all who come to him, whether grand or lowly.)

Extremes of idealization and of defamation also inform the aspects of the text that are concerned with state power and the comparison of cultures. Thus Corinth 'ist besessen von der Gier nach Gold . . . Man mißt den Wert eines Bürgers von Korinth nach der Menge des Goldes, die er besitzt, und berechnet nach ihr die Abgaben, die er dem Palast zu leisten hat' (35) (is obsessed with the greed for gold . . . The worth of a citizen of Corinth is measured according to how much gold he possesses, and calculated by the taxes he must pay to the palace). The Corinthian government is corrupt and nepotistic (122), what is good is defined through its usefulness (112), duty takes preference over personal inclination (121) and the subtle and manipulative workings of power means that citizens have developed 'eine feine Witterung für die kleinsten Veränderungen der Atmosphäre um die Mächtigen, von der wir . . . auf Leben und Tod abhängig sind' (154) (a fine sense for the smallest changes in the atmosphere surrounding the powerful, on whom we . . . depend for life and death). Furthermore, the Corinthians

consider themselves superior to all around and are therefore blind to what they themselves are really like (164). The Corinthian men never show their emotions (29) and the women are nothing but 'sorgfältig gezähmte Haustiere' (18) (carefully tamed pets), who resent the self-confidence of the Colchian women in their midst. In contrast, Colchis was a state in which the ideals of a just regent, harmonious community and equality of ownership still governed people's political consciousnesses. The king still only lived in a wooden palace (49), the women's voices were heard and taken seriously (53) and the men showed their emotions freely. Even in Corinth the women from Colchis hold their heads high despite doing the dirty work (155), and their celebratory approach to childbirth is catching on in Corinth (110).

It matters little whether in the juxtaposition of Corinth and Colchis parallels are drawn between present-day consumer-based Germany and the early and still idealistic East Germany, or more generally between the developed West and its underdeveloped but corruptible Other. The level of idealization and simplification that sustains the polarity is such that Wolf does little more than assert the evils of greed, state power and xenophobia against the virtues of individual respect, inner strength and emotional integrity. The clichés of the noble savage and the natural woman are superimposed upon the utopia of equality to produce a vapid heroine whose greatest insight is in her admission that someone like her cannot really exist: 'Es ist dahin gekommen, das es für meine Art, auf der Welt zu sein, kein Muster mehr gibt, oder daß noch keines entstanden ist, wer weiß' (161). (It has reached the point where there is no longer any scope for living in the world as I do, or maybe there never was, who knows.) The challenge to the reader of the uncompromising and cruel Medea of myth has been sacrificed for a contemporary didacticism that simplifies in order to enhance its moral impact. Thus Wolf's Medea does not even know why she must act as she does and remain in Corinth as a knowing victim instead of escaping to the rebel women with Arinna: 'Es geht nicht, Arinna, sagte ich, und sie: Warum nicht. Ich konnte es ihr nicht erklären' (183). (It won't work Arinna, I said, and she replied: why not. I could not explain it to her.)

Despite her evident interest in the question of how female identity interacts with perceptions of national identity, Wolf's impossible utopian vision interferes with the creative exploration of the complex, shifting and often contradictory elements that constitute any identity. In her text the good are very, very good and the bad are horrid, but, unlike the girl with the curl, they are never both. Her Medea so totally inhabits the role of persecuted heroine that suffering, with the hatred, destruction and self-obsession it can engender, is replaced by the unselfish quest for enlightenment and willing

self-sacrifice. There is little here that either acknowledges or contributes to contemporary debates surrounding female identity. The escape into a new myth produces, but does not acknowledge, new blind spots.

My purpose in this book, as outlined above, is to focus closely on representations of female and national identity in fictional narrative and to demonstrate the importance of ambiguity, tension and contradiction for challenging and developing an understanding of what constitutes female and national identity. I hope to achieve this in two main ways. First, by focusing on the complexity of the texts themselves. The authors whose work forms the subject of the study – Ingeborg Bachmann, Anne Duden and Emine Sevgi Özdamar – in different ways establish a conceptual link between individual female identity and national identity, making a connection between individual and national psychosis or exposing the idealization, prejudice or deceit upon which identity is often justified. They explore this link without seeking to reconcile any ambiguity or tension which may arise. Although the emphasis of the study is literary, it is not narrowly so in scope, and this, then, relates to my second aim. I do not apply one methodology to all the texts, nor bring to them one particular understanding of what constitutes identity, but instead seek to incorporate a hermeneutic awareness into the analysis. It is not my desire to argue for one theory of identity, but to show the ways in which quite different theories may elucidate a text. Furthermore, and this is crucial, these theories are themselves, when seen in interaction with specifically literary features, elucidated and challenged by the stylistic and cognitive complexity of the literary text. It is for this reason that I do not ascribe to theoretical discourse the authority with which to validate the argument that ambiguity and contradiction are central to understanding identity.[9] Theoretical discussions of identity, of course, also recognize ambiguity as central, but they do so in the service of an argument. In the texts studied here, ambiguity and irresolution are constructed and explored through very different textual means that do not have simple parallels with historical or cultural studies. The creative dimension of fiction offers a qualitatively different understanding of identity from other disciplines, and far from being seen to be in thrall to their 'authority', of illustrating theoretical insights, narrative fiction in its own terms extends our intellectual and emotional comprehension of what constitutes identity. Furthermore, to use theoretical discourse as an 'authority' in relation to fictional texts, rather than in a relationship of mutual elucidation, not only confers upon it a truth claim greater than that which fiction offers, but also assumes a level of consensus over the question of identity formation that belies the reality. Thus, rather than casting non-fictional discourse as

authoritative, I hope to incorporate into my analysis a critical awareness of theoretical debates and disagreements, so that those debates too remain open to scrutiny.

There is a degree of imbalance in this book which relates largely to the nature of the project. Most obviously, all three authors are of different nationality, and so the issues they confront vary. Whereas Bachmann and Duden both consider Austrian and German identity respectively in relation to the Holocaust, with very different emphases, Özdamar's discussion of national identity is inseparable from questions of ethnicity. Similarly, female identity is variously represented: in the work of Bachmann and Duden, suffering and victimhood are important constituents of identity, yet Özdamar focuses more explicitly on the central role of language and performance. Nor do the texts treat the themes equally. Thus, for example, in Duden's short stories there is almost no interest in national identity, whereas in *Das Judasschaf* it is vital. However, the issues raised by the short stories provide the theoretical basis for the subsequent analysis of Duden's novel and furthermore are crucial to the discussion of feminist theory and methodology which forms an integral part of this project. And in contrast to the explicit consideration of theory in the later chapters, I start with two chapters in which my argument is based on close textual analysis of Bachmann's narrative technique, crucial as it is in revealing the complex relationship between identities, deceit and desire.

PART I

Ingeborg Bachmann: the Todesarten *prose*