Dear ---

I will try to answer your questions about “Dea.” I should first say something in general. For some time I have thought that “Medea” was for the present century what Antigone was for the last. “Medea” asks questions that are political, moral and ontological. The fight against 20th century Fascism was clear-cut. The struggle with present anti-Democracy is more complex. There is also the problem that in “Medea” the murderess escapes in the chariot lent to her by a God. I think in “The Bacchae” Euripides dealt with the same core “Medea” problem but “The Bacchae” is pessimistic and the Agave-Medea character is punished.

My study “The Human Plot” isn’t directly about “Dea” but you should read “Dea” in connection with “The Human Plot.” We need a totally new understanding of the role of drama in society. The National Theatre staged a version of “Medea” which it thought it made modern by putting it in modern dress in a modern situation (Medea even ended up on a roof). It left the play’s problems unchanged -- and that was nonsense. The world and society in which the events take place are what gives a play’s action meaning. Your first question is why “Dea” is more complicated than “Medea” and why it has several different sites. The reason is that “Dea” relates to our society in which the play’s events now occur. Greek drama astonishingly dealt with many of the basic problems of being human and social and it sought to pursue the problems to a humane conclusion, to make a social programme. This was because Athens was a democracy. The audience were political and morally responsible for the city and they would seek to base their lives on the characters created in their dramas. That always sets conundrums but especially so in “Medea.” You could read my study “Tragedy and Politics.” Of course Athenians criticised the city’s political structures for partisanship and prejudice, as we do ours. But our confusions are far more profound: we cannot interpret reality. I try to make this clear in “Tragedy and Politics,” and in “The Human Plot,” in my account of reaction. Plato criticised Greek drama for attributing human passions to the Gods but this is its great strength. But it still gave morality a supernatural origin. To counter this I have describe the confrontation between the neonate (the new born child) and nothingness. The neonate’s monad uses its perceptibilities to instantiate morality in itself. You could even say that it’s perceptibilities do this to the neonate self, as if reality imprinted itself on the human mind and made us moral beings.

To understand Medea-Dea I needed to look at the elements of the total human situation (in “The Human Plot” they are the sequence ABCDE) and see how each part of society and “self” influences and changes the others and what the logic of their relation is. That is, to find the collective necessity in the apparent individual accidental.

The actress playing Dea of course asked me why Dea killed her two sons -- the problem of her personal motive that scandalises critics. I said the question is useful only in a paperback whodunit. The play seeks something more profound on which the future of our species depends. I told her a story. Six months before the murders Dea lunched in the garden with her husband Johnson. It was a pleasant summer’s days, food, wine, mood and so on were good. It came into her head – just as naturally, say, that she could see birds flying in the trees – that she would have to kill her sons. There was no “why”, but Just that, as naturally as her mouth chewed the food or she picked up a piece of bread. For the next six months she would from time to time wonder if that was the day to kill her sons. Then one evening she decided that that was when she would kill them. She killed them because during the garden meal she said she would. Im not considering the matter as a court judge would. Im writing a play about human and social reality. Almost immediately after the murders Johnson finds their bodies. He says three words and then completely forgets his dead sons. That seemed as normal as the decision in the garden to kill them. He is in the room with their bodies but is running across a battlefield with his boots stamping on the faces of dead children in a trench.
Clearly this has to do with ABCDE. The actor didn’t ask why this happened, why Johnson did it. He didn’t torture himself about his role’s character. It seemed as inevitable as Dea’s thought in the garden. The play had slipped, passed, into another site of his psyche’s and society’s structure. The audience would have noticed what had happened but accepted it as being as natural as Dea’s thought in the garden. This is not because of the script’s craft but because of drama’s revelatory reality, its direct access to what is hidden in society and that theatre usually wastes by conjuring up the supernatural and eldritch. Tragic drama unhinges the conventionalised connection between emotion and reason, self and society, rage and pathos, politics and injustice, and holds up a mirror to the self. The equivalent in Greek drama is a visit by the Gods and there it is repressive. Johnson’s loved his sons deeply. Forgetting that they were dead shows his love for them more than howling over their bodies would have done. Drama reveals the ambiguities that distort society and ravage the self. Johnson spends the rest of the play slowly fighting to get back to them to show them this love. His love haunts the rest the play. That the audience accepted what they saw shows that we need a different sort of theatre, because it shows that they didn’t know the meaning of what they were seeing and so they couldn’t know the meaning of their own lives. Later in the scene Johnson realises that Dea (not the maid) was the murderess. He asks Dea why she killed them. She says because “You wanted me to.” That is counter to the expectations of the audiences and, say, that of the popular reactionary press. The play instantly returns to the present – it releases violence. It is like treading on a mine. Johnson rapes his wife, because she killed his sons? . . . or because she told him the truth? Why didn’t he ask when did I tell you to kill them? What was my reason? Instead as he rapes her he shouts “Tell me! The truth! The truth!” as if in terror he wanted light shone into his bewilderment. Ideological ambiguities are held up by the weight of the whole of society and it cracks or crashes down when they are exposed. Family murders occur in Greek drama as often as war. Perhaps years later when Johnson sends his son (one of the twins probably conceived in the rape) to war is so that he will be killed – “because you wanted it,” another thought in the garden? The play’s first scene sets problems and asks questions that obsessively shape the rest of the play. All this calls for an explanation.

After the first performance of Dea my French publisher came to me in the foyer, held out his hand in elation and said “Shakespeare” – and added “That was something! It chucks everything at you.” He was not, of course, comparing the play to Shakespeare’s plays but meant that the play was struggling with the problem of Shakespeare’s last three tragedies: how can we make society human when society is supposed to makes us human? This paradox makes us the drama species. Drama and politics are inseparably bound together but they are Siamese twins that face opposite directions.

In some of your questions perhaps you describe situations in terms of the drama I’ve abandoned. I think that sort of drama goes round and round on a treadmill. But you have based all your questions on critical points and that makes them useful.

I disagree with one of your suggestions. Dea has oral sex with and her son Olly before she kills him for, as you wrongly suggest, failing to stand up to his father. Olly is in a comatose sleep. He is an adult but Dea longs to treat him as a child. When she was in a madhouse she couldn’t share his childhood. She repeatedly emphasises her role as mother (mummy-girl) and the beauty of a child’s body. In Oedipus the incest is between adults and neither longs to treat the other as a child. Dea gives her incest a different meaning. She wants humanly to treat, possess, Olly as a child. But now she can do this only through adult intimacy. She was denied this intimacy of motherhood. Incest is Dea’s effort to be a mother. To be human we must be paradoxical. Olly was probably conceived when Johnson raped her. Olly asked Dea and Johnson if that was so. Both fail to answer him, but for profoundly different reasons. When Olly wakes from his sleep he is appalled to find what Dea is doing with his body. Later Dea kills him but not, as you suggest, for “failing to stand up to his father.” What Dea learns is that Olly has a great, ambiguous, respect for the father he also hated. It is striking
that after Oedipus learns he has murdered his father he never mentions him – our ambiguities make us human but vulnerable. Dea kills Olly because he doesn’t understand her. To understand the power of her motive (and in the power its morality) think of the garden meal. The audience doesn’t know about that but they know other things about her, her time in a madhouse, her wanderings, Johnson’s later attempt to seduce the woman he had raped. She fellates and then kills Olly because “All of you! You murder me every day! There must be some peace for me somewhere! Something holy! Pure! Human! Some joy!” To kill Olly because he would not stand up to his father would have been vulgar and banal. As in the first scene, the play again reverses expectations and assumptions. Is Dea morally entitled to say what she does about purity and holiness? Why did she return to the house in which she murdered her sons? In the last part when the soldier is murdering her, why does she offer him a little time and space of fulfilled humanness – of the things she says (above) she was seeking for herself? It is as if she were an extraordinary mother with an extraordinary gift to give to the soldier-killer. And notice that what he says about his role as a killer Dea intuitively understands. Dea’s complexities are those of the human situation and mustn’t be reduced to the simplicities of the reactionary press and our hypocritical society. Actresses must understand and enact her moral journey. And audiences should understand her so that they may understand themselves. Think of Lady Macbeth.

You ask a general question about madness and therefore, especially in the last scene, about sanity. John is an officer, Olly’s twin brother probably born from the rape of Dea. You ask why John orders his squad to gang-rape his mother. He doesn’t know she is his mother. Really your question brings to the surface the question of the play itself. It can be useful to remember what someone has said earlier -- John had said he senses he is involved in “something so big . . . there are things in nature . . . twisted up in the wheels of reality too complicated to – I cant make you soldiers understand!” and then he orders the his squad to massacre. Its as if it is not the Oedipus situation that he senses in himself but the complicated structures of modern society. In “The Human Plot” the sexual-and-power relations are shown to be caught up in, and to partly drive, the political situation. A Greek dramatist might isolate these things because, at least on the surface, he wanted to understand “moral purity.” But we need to understand the complications and catastrophes of modern society. They are a question not just of moral purity but of complex organisation, hectic commercialism, rampant technology and in the end nuclear weapons. Unlike Dea in the last scene John doesn’t want to give life but to give death. He and Dea look at the same situation from different angles.

To keep this letter short, instead of responding to specific questions and remarks I will try to say something general -- although Dea is a play not a thesis and a play can explain the general only by the specific: this is the advantage (or burden, depending on the audience) a play has over an academic text. Don’t believe me but what Dea says and does in the play.

Why did Dea kill her sons? She herself explains why (pages 89 and 90). Its the reason that organises all the play’s scenes and why they are set in different places – a luxury home, an army outpost, a derelict abandoned site with a caravan, and the cities and streets through which Dea passes. I will suggest something before more firmly identifying what this thing is. I think it is what is destroying contemporary human society (and I wrote this before Brexit. . .).

I put the problem in a schematic image. You have a map of a very varied terrain: mountains, hills, forests, seas, rivers, valleys and soon. You encounter these things when you walk in that terrain. The terrain is both natural and made by humans. But something is added on the map that you will not meet in the terrain itself. On the map there are contour lines mapping out all the phenomena in the terrain. Now whenever you walk on the terrain and cross what on the map (but not on the terrain) is marked by a contour line, then something happens to you – perhaps you get an electric shock or felt unease, whatever it was it came from the invisible absent contour line and its relation to the terrain.
If the contour line marked the foot of a mountain, when you climbed the mountain you might sweat and be out of breathe – but suppose the contour line on the map but not the terrain, did something else to you, gave you an electric shock, gave it in its own autonomy and its own power. Suppose the whole terrain was covered with invisible contour lines (visible only on the map) that had affected you in ways that could not be reduced to the physical effect of the terrain (climbing a mountain, crossing a river). Then you would only know you were on the mountain and sweated but you would not know where you were on the map of contours or even what you were doing on that map or what it was doing to you. When the contour lines affected you, or made you do something, you wouldn’t know it was the contour lines affecting you. Perhaps they did something to you or made you do something to yourself or someone else. You wouldn’t know the contour lines were affecting, manipulating, you anymore that a puppet knew it was directed by strings. But the strings are parasitic on the puppet and it is really the puppet-master who lives and has power. In our society the contour lines on the map control reality. This is what Dea describes on pages 89-90. What do the invisible contours stand for, what do they represent? They might not stand for anything extra but just be a way of relating already existing things – say a doorstep to a house, a river to a mountain, or X to Y – when there seems no obvious connection in the terrain. Suppose the total influence of the contour lines was so great that you were in effect living not on the terrain but on the contour lines. This is the point in “The Human Plot” – there is nature, say mountains and things made from nature, but there is also consciousness. Consciousness is made of various things – reason, emotions, imagination, knowledge and so on. The contour lines are essentially in the conscious world, in lived reality, though we need not be aware of them or what they impose on us. If you consider ABCDE (in “The Human Plot”), then the contour lines are the means by which many of the relations between the various letters are conducted. And is morality a contour line or is it free of them? – perhaps it is the only thing that could be free of them? If so that is so that is why the puppet masters must above all control them if they are to control reality. This is what Dea means at the end of the play when she talks to the soldier and tries to give him life.

If society were full of these invisible (except for their effects) contour lines they would form a net. If we were fish we would swim about and live inside the net. But as fish aren’t humans perhaps they are themselves more like nets. But because human’s are conscious they can’t be reduced to being nets. The strands of the nets are the contour lines. But humans and their situations are complex (ABCDE) so that the encounter with one contour line involves encounters with many contour lines. In fact for humans the net isn’t the two-dimensional net of the fishes, its three dimensional. The six sides of the three dimensions run through the whole of human reality. We are always caught in the net whether we know it or not. We learn to survive by learning how to use the net, to submit and perhaps be corrupt by it, become “fishermen” – that is the purpose of the first scene in “Dea”. She and Johnson are meant to be going to an important meeting. Perhaps just as she encountered a contour line when she heard the bird singing in the garden, she encountered another contour line when Johnson told her to hurry and get ready to go to the meeting because his military promotion depended on it.

You can see that the contour lines are the structures of society. They are based on practical necessities but they also divide up society in certain ways: the nets are ideology encasing practicality. We don’t knowingly make a society of nets. They are made when instead of morality creating society, society creates morality. That means that society is created by the owners of the nets, and as we live our daily lives – climb mountains, walk by rivers, as it were – we don’t see the nets. We see only the invisible gaps between the strings that make up the net and we call it freedom. That is freedom without responsibility. Plays are about struggling in spaces enclosed by the invisible nets. But the law, government, administration cant allow for this struggle -- its worried that the six sides of the nets will become chaotically entangled or be ripped apart. Society will have a law that you must not murder children. But how many children will still be murdered? I think that a few
years ago in England two infants were murdered every week. At least we now no longer murder children to bury their bodies in the foundations of new public buildings. Infanticide was once sacred sacrifice. The contour lines of nets produce their own violence.

How does a drama such as Dea enact existence in the nets? Dea murders her son Olly so that she can be pure and human? Society cant allow that, though it needs sons and daughters to be killed in war? Dea is struggling in the net that distorts her and the struggle appears as the net!

Greek drama was extraordinary in that it dealt with many of the critical tensions in the net. But the cause and solutions of these tensions have changed. We need a drama that clarifies itself and in doing that clarifies reality. The nets cant be broken academically, medically or scientifically because of the problem of “seeing.” When Oedipus saw what he had done he blinded himself so that he could no longer do such things? We blind ourselves so that we can go on doing them. Above all this is how reaction and Fascism works – it cannot see the nets that imprison it. The devices of drama can make the unseen net visible. The complexities of human culture are projected into physical and cultural pedimenta – uniforms, regalia, building styles, traffic lines, expressions, gestures, postures and so on and on. We cant escape these connections. It isnt a text in the way letters make words, instead the invisible “net text” reads us. The three dimensional net is absolute and unbreakable unless there is a way of reaching the net in ourselves and doing it communally and historically. The net cant be broken externally because there is nothing outside the net. Drama breaks it by involving the whole net and not just segments of it – it does this in the way the net is itself created. You can understand the subtlety of the net: it is a mobile prison that changes in shape to imprison whatever attacks it. That is the artifice of nets. It is a triple-bind. The effect is that because the small thing is the site of emotion it hides the bigger things.

The net is made by society’s injustice. Our communal need for justice is precisely what leads to our injustice. The net is a structure of violence caused by injustice. The violence conforms itself to the normal day-to-day. It becomes extreme only in crisis. Part two of Dea shows the extreme violence. Part one shows the violence in everyday normality. In rehearsal we found that although the first scene is about infanticide its also about the maid in danger of losing her job. It was extraordinary how the two thing fitted seamlessly together as part of the same segment of net, the same social situation. The maid’s boyfriend helped her to manage her life so that she could “steer choices” through the society of necessities. The net works as a geometrical deformation of structure and so of relations and values. In scene one the situation breaks down (because Dea is preternaturally aware of the contour lines -- of course you can say that is just a device of the drama but that is not a criticism) and then the marriage relationship turns into violent rape. Even then it still contains a search for humaness, for human responsibility: Johnson’s cries of “Tell me! Tell me!” Its only later that the zombie of violence appears in Johnson’s second rape of Dea when he behaves like an imp educated by reading the Mail and the Express. In the first scene Johnson is in the net of the important government meeting, harassment by a military superior and the class difference between him and Dia. Ordinary tensions accumulate in the extraordinary. The idea of contour lines seems abstract but they release real, logical, structures of situations – so that finally Dea seduces and then murder her child in order to gain purity. This is also Hitler’s defence. The difference is that he thinks his murders are pure, Dea thinks she murdered to gain purity. Hitler is ideologically corrupt, understood properly Dea is a victim in a net.

The contour lines can exist because a society of conscious individuals must organise itself. The problem is that historically the organisation supports injustice. This causes violence in authority and its victim. In daily reality a suit contains only one person, in ideology it contains a crowd -- it is part of its fashion and make. The idea of contour lines and a three dimensional net is only an abstract way of understanding. But in drama it releases extraordinary emotions and acts – consider how
Dea’s murdering to find purity leads to her humane vision of life (and of the soldier’s victimhood) in the last part of the play. Interpreting this range of contradictory emotions and reasons made demands on the actress who played Dea and on all the actors in the play. In performance they showed that the events of play were understandable, cognisable. This justified the play and its humanness. Perhaps behind all art there is the sense of freedom from the net – certainly this is so in the work of great artists such as Bach and Rembrandt. In drama this sense of freedom is responsibility for our shared life.

You say that unlike in other plays, the characters in Dea seem “unable to ask the human question or question the reality they are presented in.” I understand your question, though I think some of the characters do raise these questions. But what you see as the characters’ questions are the play’s questions. Defining them is the play’s purpose. As Dea dies she says society cant go on as it is. We are a species that is destroying its habitat and probably destroying itself. In parts of the world that have freed themselves from imperialist exploitation and repression there may be reason to hope. But the whole world seems to be entering the capitalist prison and practicing its destructiveness.

The idea of the contour map is a heuristic device to help in understanding. In human reality nothing is isolated, all things are connected. Left and right, cup and saucer, wish and consequence, cause and effect, space-time, an object only exists because there are other objects. That is the structure of reality. Using the idea of contour lines is to show that abstract ideas depend on material objects. Together they make up culture. The national anthem, a colour bar, offence and law, reward and punishment, music and a national dance, the connection of things is the way they change each other. The invisible contours derive from the total culture and create the being of reality. If you see someone killing a child you intervene. There is a legal law against infanticide – that is a contour -- and the moral law is that you should intervene. But suppose the contours are unjust and in place to maintain injustice. It is legally lawful to stop the infanticide but suppose the social-culture needs the infanticide so that you can stop it and so justify all the other contours that bind and maintain unjust society. That is a cheap paradox: you need crime for the sake of law. But the paradox is a foundation of unjust society. In the same way you need money to make purchases but money is a cultural minefield and is maintained through practicality but also through injustice. The psychological complications weave a net. You can imagine a millionaire whose hobby is shop-lifting. The contours are not neutral but are a map of culture. In unjust society the contours maintain injustice and distort the practical – in an unjust society it can be unjust that the cup stands on the saucer. After all, there is a cultural class etiquette of handling cups and saucers. Of course the example is absurd. And it is not the point that there can be arbitrary cultural and religious shibboleths that you can be in trouble for breaking. The unjust cup-and-saucer isn’t a practical problem (unless you are dying of thirst but have no money to buy water). The point is that in unjust society the contour map controls the meanings held by the rational species. Drama is not a contour line because it contains is own intellectual irony. The irony was lost when the Greek stage became the Roman Colosseum and the Christian religion was the last Greek play. A cup on stage is not the same object as a cup on a restaurant table. On the stage it is in moral quote marks. By its nature drama suspends practicality (Hamlet doesn’t die). The stage is on this side of the contour lines. It is in reality just in the way religion claims to be.

The circus is another form of theatre. It is an entertainment but deals with danger. Clowns are maniacal and killer animals must be tamed. The clown holds up a loop covered with issue paper. The tiger squats quasi-human-upright on a tub. The clown signals. The tiger jumps through the hoop. The tissue paper is destroy. A wild animal is tamed. Spectators cheer. It works because in the circus clown, hoop, tissue paper and lion are all contour lines. What if the same thing happens in drama on a stage. There drama uses the logic of imagination, which is the logic of reality (see “The Human
Plot”). In the stage drama the lion leaps. Rips through the tissue – and comes out on the other side as a human being.

What happens in the circus is literary true but it denies the whole of pre-human, pre-moral reality. The change on the stage from beast to human is not literally true but is true in the imagination. The imagination might not even “image the change,” put no conscious picture in the mind. It makes no difference. The transformation is true in the logic of imagination and of human reality and that is also the logic of humanness. Reactionaries will deny this. When they do so they deny their own humanness and the lesson of the last hundred years is that all reaction must lead to Fascism.

In the play Dea “intuits” the contours and their function. In the past society allowed drama a peep behind the contour lines (it was a safety valve). Modern drama is on both sides of the contour lines. Dea lunches in the garden. A bird sings and she realises she must kill her children. By this I don’t mean anything bizarre or “poetic.” Of course a real woman wouldn’t respond to a bird call in this way. Or If she did she would be mad. But in the play the call to infanticide may come even from the contour lines themselves – an after-tremor from the earliest times when a primal horde struggled to impose order on itself. Such a reading would depend on the audience. Early forms of group justice would have been ritualistic, even hallucinatory. Hard cash came only later. I dont pursue this here. The point us that present society is a unified consistent command structure. It dominates psychological will. In the play its as if infanticide is a social moral-imperative. It is why infanticide occurs throughout the play and often is endorsed by authority. The social-political situation makes the endorsement necessary – the problem is that the contour lines make the situation.

“Dea” goes behind the contour lines in the image of the dead children on the carousel laughing as they ride the wooden horses. The image is her son’s desperate uncanny need for humanness. Dea at one point “knows” she must kill her children but she understands why she kills them only in the last scene. Its as if she comes to understand the play she is in. The understanding is affirmed by her imagination. The play interprets reality so that it may return to our daily world. This is the dynamic of drama. The drama interprets the audience and their world and at the end the play returns to their society. Dea says that in that society the structure of contours are orders commanding you to do everything, whatever it is, not because you choose or want to do it, for pleasure or any such reason, but because it is an order. You live in a structure of invisible boxes made of net. The Greeks laid the foundation of our democracy. The play uses infanticide and the other crimes of Greek drama to show that our society is entangled in injustice. Greek drama could not solve the problems it raised. That is why its drama decayed into the Roman arena. At the end of his life Euripides knew he had not solved or even understood the problems of his “Medea”. Its because he failed that the second part of Dea takes place in a war and the third part in a derelict dump where orders are given by a severed head.

An outline summary: the situation in “Medea” and “Dea” is complex. We think our choices are prompted by our emotions, reasons, force, open persuasion. All elements of society, objects, institutions, relations, everything, are bound in a mutually penetrative complex. Beyond this there is an abstract structure, the contour lines laid down by the administrators (rulers, owners). They own social reality and so they own each individual life in it. It gives them power and historically they are unjust, perhaps in part because of the enormity of the task. They create both assent and the forms of dissent. This structure is prior to emotion, reason and so on. The rulers, owners, create the contour lines. Together the lines form a structure of invisible net boxes. Today culture mistakenly substitutes for the boxes the fog of Freudism-Darwinism: it is another box. A useful image: when a building, say a house, is built it is encased in scaffolding. When it is completed the scaffolding is taken away. But the scaffolding encasing society always remains. Our lives conform to this enduring scaffolding, the invisible nets. Drama’s work is to destroy the nets. Historically drama “investigated”
the net -- Euripides did it in “Medea.” Modern drama turns the nets inside out. I put Dea in boxes of nets but gave her the preternatural insight that our society is a structure of commands. When in the end she leaves the nets she is radically human and so in our society dies.

Thanks for your interesting questions. If I can be of any further help let me know.

Best wishes, Edward.