

Medea in the history of theatre

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Abstract: *The dramatic art, the expression which encapsulates best the human art by showing the most complete mirror of life, has represented in the Greek acceptance more than a harmonious unification of all arts, where the art of setting has proven to be primitive and the music far from reaching its ultimate level of development. The Greek tragedy has been born through a song. At first, it was a liturgical manifestation in the ceremonies of cult and collective life. Tragedy was part of Dionysos-Bacchos cult, the god of wine and debauchery. In Euripides' theatre, an extended space is given to female characters, but his opinions regarding women seem at first sight somehow contradictory.*

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1. Introduction

Euripides, the last of the three great Athenian playwrights whom Aristotle called the "tragic poet par excellence," had a rather extensive work. He portrayed Greek tragedy in numerous plays, including Iphigenia in Aulis, the Trojans, the Prayers, the Phoenicians, Heraclias, Medea, Orestes, Hecuba, and Heracles, with the aim of creating conflicts and characters that greatly secularize the drama of Greece, emphasizing the soul's problems. man. Euripides outlines characters who carry passions, sometimes violent, and not victims of destiny.

2. Medea in Euripides' theatre

Medea is a tragedy of revenge. After falling in love with Creusa, the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth, Jason leaves Medea. In an access of despair and wishing for revenge, Medea looks for ways to punish the unfaithful Jason; she poisons both Creusa and Creon with a golden tiara and a poisoned scepter. Then, still dreaming of revenge and wanting to punish Jason harder, she kills their two children. After finding out about Medea's crimes, Jason gives order to be confined in order to get his revenge, but she escapes before he has the chance to act, in a carriage drawn by winged dragons while dragging the bodies of the two dead children. The play ends with Jason begging Medea to give him his children's bodies in order to bury them, but in vain, since Medea remains relentless and she confronts him, completing her revenge.

Medea introduces in Euripides' theatre an exception through the shockingly tragic theme, the theme of revenge from a jealousy caused by a morbid passion. *Medea* is one of Euripides' characteristic plays, and it shows an essential nature of the poet: the passion of love, with all the storms it can cause in the human heart. The heroes and heroines of Aeschylus and Sophocles – Clitemnestra, Agamemnon - proclaim their passion, glorify it, but they do not describe it, they do not offer the analysis of the feelings and sensations it causes. Euripides' heroes, on the contrary, live it, manifest it in all its elements, and paint it on an entire canvas of manifestations. Their tragic essence is built from the impressive development of their passions.²

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² Zamfirescu, I., *Istoria universala a teatrului*, vol. I, [The universal history of theater, vol. I], București, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, 1958, p. 93.

The subject of *Medea* has been approached by many tragedy writers from different eras, such as Seneca, Corneille (1635), de Longepierre (1694), Ernest Legouve (1854), Catulle Mendès (1898). Euripides' *Medea* opens a battlefield between love and hate, and Medea passes the invisible border between normalcy and madness. Twisted by hate and suffering, she succumbs to a tragic loneliness, where reason is smothered by the pulse of unreason. Madness does not deprive Medea of the coherence of an adequate attitude in order to attain her purpose, the ultimate revenge. Glauce and her old father's death, perfectly orchestrated by Medea, is the proof of a genuine talent in the art of killing. She aims to touch the ultimate level of revenge by stabbing her own children. The assassination of the children represents the creation in the demonic space of a true dark masterpiece. Medea's tragedy talks about the way in which the unseen power of evil can destroy the human nature, the frail human nature as soon as the insatiable passions are taking the place of reasonable feelings. Euripides presents a society where men act according to interests, while women must sacrifice their personality and needs in order to serve men. The theme of power relationship between men and women in Ancient Greece is practically present in every play, the subordination of the woman being a given in society. Medea however, as the Chorus mentions (1282-85) is a singular case, as she herself is a stranger, a "barbarian".

Medea took control of her own fate, did not accept the fact that her man decided instead of her, committed a crime by invading the male domain of violence, revenge, power. Although the play is focused around Medea, the dramatization of her inner journey is not satisfying. Medea completes her plans of revenge by pushing herself to kill her children, but she does not change particularly her inner motivation during the play. The genders are reversed: the unyielding, pugnacious, unshakeable hero is Medea, the woman, while the feminine vulnerability of emotions and soul can be found in Jason, the male character. This represents Euripides' genius in this play. The innovation brought by him in the dramatic structure of this play is that instead of a tragedy which develops only a central conflict of a protagonist, Euripides offers us a social and psychological tapestry much more complex, where the ancient array of social layering is combined with the frustration of middle age, with the passion without age, with reprehensible prevarication, with motivated infanticide and the experience of immigration. Immediately after Euripides, Apollonius Rhodius proposed the version of accidental killing, Medea trying in fact to turn her children immortal. From Seneca's perspective, the core is the passion, the demons created by the uncontrollable emotion. Prisoner of this passion, Medea is described as being more harmful than monsters and natural disasters. Jason is not an antagonist as he is in Euripides' play, but he is a weak and powerless man in front of Medea's demons of passion.

Seneca reveals in detail cruel scenes, suffering and death, as well as memorable quotes, such as Medea's. "The one, who cannot hope, cannot despair either". Euripides and Apollonius Rhodius present Medea's human side, while Seneca is only interested in portraying her as a demonic witch. Euripides' *Medea* has a victim speech, but the message of the play does not keep her as a victim. If in Euripides' play she saves herself through a *deus ex machina*, by escaping in a chariot drawn by winged dragons, in Seneca's play she transforms after the murder and reveals her *daimon* nature, non-human or superhuman.

Pierre Corneille's *Medea* approaches the same themes of love, jealousy, unfaithfulness, inner conflict between marital love and maternal love, as well as the desire for revenge. Euripides presents her in the most humane way, by diminishing her power and magical aura, and she is described as the stereotypical woman, prisoner of a male centered universe. She is a powerless victim. Seneca sees this destructive capacity of women as being responsible for the unhappiness of people and chaos. Corneille presents Medea as being a problematic woman in

a male universe. Medea illustrates the fundamental values of the universe defined by Corneille: the unity between word and fact, the creation of a cult of self, super humanity, the rejection of normalcy; able to stay true to her word and do efficaciously what she intended to do, she does not accept compromise, her love for Jason does not come from an unreasonable passion, but a consequence and insistence in recognizing her own identity. Corneille defines her as a heroine surrounded by male non-heroes. Medea, despite de supernatural ending, is considered a tragedy in human space, realistic and not entirely mythological. It is the drama of a heroine who kills her children in a fit of jealousy, rage, despair, hate, wishing for revenge. The German philologist Max Pohlnez calls Medea a *Seelendrama*, the purpose of the play being to offer an artistic dramatization of a psychological sequence of events and present a subjective truth of the character.

Kitto argues that Euripides did not manage to create a believable portrait of the main heroine, and left to the public the difficulty to decipher Medea's psychological motivation and also illustrates the fact that it is not even related to psychology, but pathology, since Medea's acts are criminal and indefensible. Medea's passion is stronger than her reason, and she knows that there is no calm place for her, there is no emotional stability, and there is no comfort, no happiness. From Medea's perspective, by killing her children, she gives them a chance to happiness in the next world. In this world, happiness is not meant for her and the ones she loves. The play Medea refers in general also to the great specter of emotions a human being can manifest. As Kitto also states, "We all have inside of ourselves besides reason, non-reasonable emotions (unreasonable), which can derail, bringing down reason and calling disaster. In the last instance, Euripides' tragic hero is humanity itself"³. Heiner Müller's *Medea* becomes victim as well as the object and author of violence. Müller explores Medea's potential by using her not as a character, but as material by creating several juxtapositions, and character contradictions, structural, narrative and as performance. Medea seems to fascinate not only as a character, but also as an ensnaring oddity, and she is not only a victim of circumstances, but a symbol of survival post-colonization, as she opposes the society which allowed the injustice to happen. She sees her children as the expression of the corrupt society that persecuted her. It represents a series of marginal sections of the society regarding her alienation in birth and education and her concept of justice and normalcy, while clashing with what seems right and adequate in Corinth. It is a play about human alienation, sexual inequity, treason, the destruction of a civilization and the end of an era.

In Müller's approach, Jason's story is one of the first myths of Greek colonialism, the end of it. His death, killed by his own ship, means the turning point where myth turns into history. The colonizer is put down by his own tool, by what helped him until then to reach the colonized territory. *Medeamaterial* follows closely the traditional story and becomes the monologue of a betrayed woman who seeks revenge, of a mother wretched by pain, a monodrama put between the layers of some dialogues that do not constitute themselves in well-defined scenes. It is a search for the roots of evil in the human being, and Medea is a monster, but the mechanism of crime is her soul's illness, it is hidden in the human nature.

Through her acts, Medea defies her gender and cannot undertake completely the other one. She is condemned to live somewhere between genders, somewhere between worlds. Somehow, this is also the personal and general drama Müller lives, "*German schizophrenia*", as he calls it.

Franz Grillparzer creates *Medea* in the third part of the *Golden Fleece* trilogy, the main heroine emphasizing her barbarian and alien perception and diminishing her magic and

³ Octavian Gheorghiu, *Istoria teatrului universal*, [The history of universal theater], București, Editura didactică și pedagogică, 1963, p. 73.

supernatural qualities. She is not a murderer, as she is in the original myth: she does not kill her brother in order to help Jason; he kills himself to avoid becoming hostage. If in Euripides' play she is sly, the Austrian Medea honestly suffers and kills her children to save them from unhappiness, not only to complete her revenge. The passion, the love is thus demonized and presented as a sin that makes the heroine to give up on her noble nature and commit monstrous acts. Grillparzer's play starts with the final scene; Medea finds her end tragically and painfully. She admits her crimes; she knows fame and happiness are only shadows in a dream. The prologue and the first act of the play take place in an oriental atmosphere, with traditional songs, the sunny Greece being opposed to the dark Colchide, the magical land of Colchide being described as in Euripides' vision, where the day is night and the night is terror.

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, we can say that the Greek Euripides tragedy places man from the very beginning at his extreme limit, at the border where the divine begins. Any tragedy signifies and stimulates the hero's energy to overcome himself by an incredible act of courage, to give a new measure to his greatness in the face of obstacles, to the unknown with whom he meets in the world and in the society of his time. The tragedy shows us that in the very fact of human existence there is a challenge or paradox, it tells us that sometimes man's aspirations come into contradiction with inexplicable and destructive forces that are beyond and yet very close to us.

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