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## MEDEA IN ITALIAN LITERATURE

*Nota omnibus Medea* (Petrarch)

The myth of the Argonauts and Medea was well known in Greek and Latin culture, for it embodied feelings and behaviours, which are typical of human nature. No wonder, therefore, that it spread through Italian literature soon from its beginning. In the Italian schools, during the Middle Ages, Latin language was currently taught and spoken, and the most important works of Latin literature were fundamental for a sound education. Among these works, there were Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which contain the longest narration of Medea's tragedy, full of psychological details. And we cannot forget that the myth of the Argonauts was considered an example of human boldness and ingenuity, for it describes the first human's tentative of navigation. So it is not without reason that Petrarch uttered the words we have put in the beginning (*De remediis utriusque fortunae*, I 52, 8), though he blamed Medea' passions and deeds.

### 1. The Argonauts' myth

The great, heroic enterprise of the Argonauts, which was celebrated in classical times, provoked a warm admiration in the greatest Italian poet, Dante Alighieri. In his *Comedia (Paradiso*, II 16-18) he evokes "those glorious men who sailed to Colchis", and Jason's labour of ploughing, when he had to subdue the furious bulls.

But another great poet and scholar, Francesco Petrarca, interpreted the myth in a new way, that is critically: in his opinion, the Argonauts weren't a band of heroes, a group of bold young men who reached the boundaries of the world in search for the Golden Fleece, but a crew of pirates, such as there were so many in the Mediterranean Sea during the Middle Ages, in his own

times (*De remediis utriusque fortunae* (I 117, 8)): in spite of Ennius' words (*scaen.*, 250-251, which Petrarch quotes indirectly, through Cic., *Tusc.*, I 20, 45), they were not illustrious men, but *vere predones*, drawn by the *fama divitiarum*. Indeed, the famous Golden Fleece possesses no noble signification, does not allegorize the desire of glory, and of confronting the most difficult enterprises, but simply indicates that vulgar people are in search of wealth. According to Petrarch, the Argonauts simply looked for luxurious clothes, that is the Golden Fleece. Also in *Epist.*, *Familiares*, XIX 3, 5 Petrarch, meditating on some Ennius' lines (which he knew, as usual, thanks to a quotation in Cicero), describes the Argonauts, who "parva spe magno et procelloso mari Colchon barbaricam petiere, ubi regnabat *incognitus rex Oethes*". The 'feeble hope' is the greed of wealth, certainly not the desire of knowing the king Oetes and his country.

## 2. Jason

According to Jason's characteristics he found in the classics, Dante strictly condemned him as a seducer, describing his punishment in one of the lowest 'circles' of his *Inferno*, the first of the so called 'Malebolge' (XVIII, 86 ss.).

Quelli è Iasòn, che per cuore e per senno / li Colchi del mownton privati fene. / Ello passò per l'isola di Lenno [...] Ivi con segni e con parole ornate / Isifile ingannò, la giovinetta / che prima avea tutte l'altre ingannate. / Lasciolla quivi, gravida, soletta; / tal colpa a tal martiro lui condanna; / e anche di Medea si fa vendetta. / Con lui sen va chi da tal parte inganna ...

Jason surely was endowed with boldness and intelligence, but had deceived and abandoned first Hypsipyle and then Medea (the two heroines are often introduced together by poets who described Jason's forfeits). This description is most probably drawn from Statius *Thebais* (books 5 and 6), a poem which enjoyed a great popularity in the Middle Ages and which Dante uses extensively.

## 3. Medea

### 3, 1. Medea in literature

According to Dihle<sup>1</sup>, European literatures characterized Medea in three ways; either she is a loving woman, ready even to kill her husband and her sons to take vengeance for having been abandoned; or she is a demonic per-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. A. Dihle, *Euripides' Medea und ihre Schwestern in europäischen Drama*, Antike und Abendland 22, 1976, 175-184.

son, endowed with superhuman (that is, infernal) powers; or, lastly, she is a barbarian woman, whose customs don't fit the civilized Greece. The first categorization has its origins in Euripides' tragedy and spread from the Renaissance theatre to the Italian 'Opera'; demonic Medea is inspired by Seneca's – but also by Ovid's – characterization; the third type is much more recent, and spread particularly in modern European literatures: in hard polemic against racism and colonialism, aims at giving Medea a higher estimation.

Generally speaking, Italian literature was much more interested in describing Medea as a loving and passionate woman, whose vicissitudes excited warm feelings.

Petrarch, on the contrary, reminds Medea's drama and her wrath, in the *Triumphus Cupidinis* (I, 128-132); but he wrote this work in his old age: therefore, he does not justify Medea: true, she loved Jason and hoped to have deserved his love, but she was guilty of murdering her father and her brother.

The poet who was more interested in Medea was Giovanni Boccaccio. Many of his works, just as his *Decameron*, are romantic and erotic, and he is moved in many, different, ways, considering the fortunes of the heroine. Medea was exceedingly beautiful, he says in *Comedia delle ninfe fiorentine* 12; she appears in the crowd of loving women, whose catalogue is given in *Filocolo*, IV 83, and in *Rime* parte II 38,75 (because of her love to Jason, she abandoned her father); she is a poisoner and a sorcerer (*Teseida*, I 102; *Commedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, 34). As usual in Mediaeval treatises on love, sometimes Boccaccio cites Medea as an example of the changes love produces in humans: disputing with the queen (a character of his novel, *Il Filocolo*), Caleone says that Medea was forced by love to abandon herself, her honour and her country, and to follow Jason. This means that, thanks to love, humans utterly immolate themselves; but the queen replies that love usually produces dangerous effects, just as those mentioned above (*Filocolo*, IV 45). The terrible consequences of love and the madness it causes, are a commonplace in Mediaeval literature, and Boccaccio mentions them several times (for instance in *Commedia delle ninfe fiorentine*, 29, *Amorosa Visione*, IX 25 ss., containing a catalogue of famous women<sup>2</sup>).

In the *Amorosa Visione* the whole chapter XXI is interesting. Boccaccio represents not only Hypsipyle and Medea, but also Creusa: both are angry with the young bride (they are "con Creusa sospette"); Jason is on the scene,

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<sup>2</sup> "In abito crucciato con costei [scl., with Hypsipyle] seguia Medea crudele e dispietata; con voce ancor parea dicere: "Omei, / se io più savia alquanto fossi stata /né si avessi tosto preso amore, / forse ancor non sarei suta ingannata"". Here, again, Medea is mentioned together with Hypsipyle.

but doesn't utter a word. In a tone, which recalls Ovid's *Heroides*, first Hypsipyle reproaches him for his treachery: he loved her, but he abandoned her while she was pregnant with the twins Thoans and Eunaeus. She hoped to see Jason coming back soon, but she heard that he had fallen in love with a woman in Colchis and had changed his feelings<sup>3</sup>. So now, Jason does not mind her and takes delight of Hypsipyle's foe. Her sufferings are terrible, but she begs in vain Jason not to leave her. Medea too is moved by wrath: she reproaches Jason for neglecting her love; indeed, she had loved him more passionately than any other woman did. Furthermore, she helped him to escape the dangers in Colchis and to catch the Golden Fleece; and, what's most infamous to her, she killed her young brother Absyrtos, so that she could fly with him. Thanks to her magic arts, she rejuvenated Aeson, Jason's old father, killed Jason's uncle Pelias, so that he eventually could reign in Thessaly. He is well aware that Medea will do everything in order to please him – yet, longing for another woman, he forgot even his sons. As a conclusion, Medea begs Jason to come back to her, who is his wife, but he takes care neither of Hypsipyle nor of Medea and gladly embraces Creusa (XXII, 1-3).

Elsewhere Boccaccio, considering Medea's cruelty, somehow justifies Jason's behaviour. In *Filocolo*, III 18 Florio is longing of his loved Biancifiore; he is compared to Hypsipyle, abandoned by Jason, who fell in love for another young girl – but he had to do so, because he was in danger, and he could not have saved himself if Medea hadn't helped him. Soon after these events, Jason abandoned Medea, but, again, *pour cause*, due to her cruelty<sup>4</sup>: he had met Creusa, who was so kind and loving.

As a whole, Giovanni Boccaccio, the poet of love and the storyteller of the *Decameron*, was the writer most interested in Medea's vicissitude, in her adventures, or faults, and eventually found some reasons for justifying her. In the same way, the Renaissance poet Matteo Maria Boiardo shows his sympathy for her, though he knows, as every poet or narrator did<sup>5</sup>, that she was a sorcerer, skilful in magic arts; she could tie and untie the lovers by the filters she prepared with unknown grasses; yet she couldn't untie herself from the chains of Love (*Amores*, I 48, 5-8).

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<sup>3</sup> "ch'avevi nuova amica presa in Colcòs e mutato proposto" (vv. 41-42).

<sup>4</sup> This is a topic; in the same work, there is a catalogue of cruel women (Clitemnestra, Helen, Procne and other): there Medea too is present: cf. III, 35.

<sup>5</sup> For example, Matteo Bandello. It is worth mentioning also a miscellaneous 'novel' by Francesco Colonna (XVth century), the *Hypnerotomachia Polifili* (p. 178, 275, 390 ed. G. Pozzi, Padua 1980): the author labels Medea with the usual characterization as sorcerer, and lover.

### 3, 2. Medea on the stage

Thanks to the rediscovery of classical theatre, a new literary genre rose in Italy and spread through Europe during the Renaissance. Greek and Latin tragedies were 'rewritten' in Italian: it was not, however, a simple translation, but an interpretation and a modification of Euripides' or Seneca's plots. In the Renaissance Medea is not a real, living woman of the past, as the Middle Ages had considered her, but a mythical character – that is, not 'historical'; as such, she is an unvarying, uniform character, always identified by her magical arts and provided with extreme cruelty. While the Senecan tragedy was considered the model *par excellence* of Medea's vicissitude, Horace became the theoriser of her savage and uncivilized behaviour.

3, 2, 1. Among these Italian tragedies, we can mention the *Medea* by Ludovico Dolce, a polygraph, who wrote eight dramas (*Medea* was published in 1557). As we said, in the XVIth century, translation was often a remaking: therefore, the source of Dolce's *Medea* is Euripides' drama. In fact, the Italian poet was an admirer of Euripides, as every cultivated man was in XVIth century. At the same time, he inserted in the plot some details from Seneca. Tragedy was highly estimated as a dramatic genre of classical origin, even though it was considered as a relic of heathenism. However, interest for Greek tragedy wasn't common in Renaissance Italy, and particularly in the years 1540 - 1560, when the Catholic Reformation didn't approve plots ending in catastrophe and desperation. Furthermore, the literary tastes of cultivated people preferred a 'happy end'.

Sometimes sentences or exhortations to Christian faith were artfully inserted into the tragedies, into the choruses and at the end, so that the author could distinguish himself from the ancient poets of pagan dramas. It was recommended introduce on the stage a feminine character, who might be not a heroine, but a victim, or a young girl whose destiny could arouse pathos (e.g. Antigone), or an old woman, whose vicissitude arose piety (e.g. Hecuba). Nevertheless, feminine characters were allowed acting cruelly, infringing laws, being liable for the evil they had done. Such was Medea, the sorcerer inspired by hell, merciless and unable of repentance, thanks to the long tradition we hinted at.

4. And, as it was normal for the Italian scholars in the Cinquecento, such a frightful character, modelled from Euripides' and Seneca's tragedy, interested authors of rhetorical and poetical treatises<sup>6</sup>. In their works nothing remained

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<sup>6</sup> Also a great poet, Torquato Tasso was interested in this theoretic problems; he observes that Thyestes', Medea's and Oedipus' story (Tasso is considering the most famous Senecan tragedie)

of the sprightliness of the ancient and mediaeval Medea; the heroine is analysed only from the point of view of the dramatic technique and the exigency of how to construct a character fitting to rational rules: who is depicted by tradition as cruel, in no way can appear tender toward her sons. Could, therefore, Medea feel pity to his children? Was Jason a heroic character, or not? He didn't possess any actual virtue; a hero might be, on the contrary, Charles the Great ...

Yet, such a schematism didn't choke Medea's life, her love, and her wrath, which were stronger than erudition, and continued to the subject of dramas (also musical ones) in the following centuries, until our ages.

Of course, it is not possible to single out the whole story of Medea in Italian literature; we limit ourselves to mention some significant examples, drawn from the production of nineteenth and twentieth centuries: classicizing tragedies continued to be written<sup>7</sup>. But much more interesting are the modern distortions or adaptations of the myth. The popular *feuilleton* writer Francesco Mastriani was the author of a long novel *Medea di Porta Medina* (a popular quarter in Naples), published in 1915; Alberto Savinio wrote a short story in

dies) attracted many ancient poets, who, thanks to their elaboration, renewed it in many ways ("variamente tessendolo, di commune, proprio, e di vecchio, nuovo il facevano": *Discorsi dell'arte poetica*, p. 5; *Discorso del poema eroico*, libro secondo, p. 86 - Cf. T. Tasso, *Discorsi dell'arte poetica e del poema eroico* a cura di L. Poma, Bari 1964.). Tasso distinguishes between the simple argument (the 'materia nuda') and the subsequent elaboration of it, which determines the success of the poet's work. Indeed, if a poet wants to rise compassion, he will be more successful treating Oedipus' misfortune, who killed his father unintentionally, than representing Medea, who, though aware of the crime she would commit, torn her sons into pieces: "questa appena sarà atta a intiepidire gli animi, ancora che l'artificio, nell'una e nell'altra (favola) usato, sia non solo simile, ma eguale". It is also very important to consider the nobility of the enterprises, such as those of the Argonauts, which were the subject of Orpheus', Homer's and Apollonius' poems. However, epic poem can have its origin from an erotic subject, as from the myth of Jason and Medea, which was treated by the Greek Apollonius and the Latin Valerius Maximus (*Del poema eroico*, libro secondo, p. 108. In this quotation I suppose a mistake by Tasso, obviously he meant Valerius Flaccus). Reputation of piety and religiousness requires a 'perfect knight', as were Charles the Great and King Arthur, not Theseus and Jason (*ibid.*, p. 98; cf. *Trattati di poetica e di retorica del Cinquecento*, a cura di B. Weinberg, vol. I-IV, Bari 1970-1974). Such and other similar considerations (rather pedantic, we admit) can be found in Bernardino Daniello's treatise *Della poetica* (a. 1536 – vol. I, p. 252), who, according to Horace's *Ars poetica*, affirms that cruel, terrible and shameful actions, such as those of Medea and of Procne, cannot have their place on the scene. On the contrary, Bartolomeo Ricci (*de imitatione liber primus* – del 1541, p. 444) thinks that such behaviours are allowed, as it is shown by Seneca's *Hercules*, "et naturam suam et fortasse etiam sua tempora secutus". Who is interested in this problem pertaining the history of Italian culture and literature can read also Gian Giorgio Trissino, *La poetica*, quinta divisione, p. 24 (anno 1549); Giason Denore, *Discorso etc.* (anno 1586 – III, p. 387); Nicolò Rossi, *Discorsi intorno alla commedia* (1589 – IV, 74. 75. 94. 96).

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. the tragedies by G. B. Nicolini (1803) or C. della Valle (1810).

1917-18, in which he identified himself with Jason. We should mention also a tragedy by Corrado Alvaro, *La lunga notte di Medea* (1949). Finally, a brief section in Cesare Pavese's masterpiece *Dialoghi con Leucò*, written just after World War II, and inspired by Greek mythical characters, reproduces a dialogue between two Argonauts about human life and ultimate destiny<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Cfr. P. Fornaro, *Medea italiana*, in *Atti delle giornate di studio su Medea*, Torino 23-24 ottobre 1995, ed. by R. Uglione, Torino 1997, 117-163. M. G. Ciani (ed.), Euripide, Seneca, Grillparzer, Alvaro, *Medea*, Venezia 1999; A. Zumbo, *La Lunga notte di Medea di Corrado Alvaro*, in *La riscrittura e il teatro dall'antico al moderno e dai testi alla scena*, a cura di P. Radici Colace e A. Zumbo, Messina 2004, 135-147; G. Ieranò, *Tre Medee del Novecento: Alvaro, Pasolini, Wolf*, in B. Gentili - F. Perusino (eds.), *Medea nella letteratura e nell'arte*, Venezia 2000, 193-216.