

Sophie Shamanidi (Tbilisi)

Male Characters of *The Fourth Dimension* by Yannis Ritsos

The collection of works by Yannis Ritsos *The Fourth Dimension* was published in 1972. It comprised works written during the previous decade and they were presumably united on the basis of their structure and issues covered. It includes 17 works written as a theatrical monologue, 12 of them being inspired by antique topics.

Typical features uniting these monologues are as follows: a) All monologues have remarks in the shape of prologues and epilogues (Ritsos uses remarks not only to describe the *mise en scenes*, but makes them a conceptual part of works); b) Action, if any, always unfolds in remarks; c) The names of protagonists are almost always mentioned in the title (for the exception of the monologue *Philoctetes*, in which Philoctetes is the listener and Neoptolemus is the speaker) and in earlier monologues *The Dead House* and *Beneath the Shadow of the Mountain*. As a rule, protagonists are not mentioned by their names; d) Although the works are monologues in form, all of them have two (in some cases, more) characters and they become visible only in remarks; e) The speeches of protagonists are always meant for the second characters of works, who remain silent during the whole of monologues and can be presented as narrators only in remarks. This element enables researchers to speak about a kind of dialogue, as there is someone, who listens to the protagonist;¹ f) The so-called mythological method is used everywhere in the same manner.

As we mentioned above 12 monologues are based on antique topics: *Agamemnon*, *Orestes*, *The Dead House*, *The Return of Iphigenia*, *Beneath the*

¹ Cf. Μερακίς Μ. Γ., *Η Τέταρτη Διάσταση* του Γιάννη Ρίτσου, in: Αφιέρωμα στον Γιάννη Ρίτσο, Κέδρος, Αθήνα 1981, 517.

Shadow of the Mountain, Chrysothemis, Persephone, Ismene, Ajax, Philoctetes, Helen and Phaedra.

The titles of monologues make it clear that most protagonists are women. The correlation here is eight to four. However, there are two males in each of the monologues *Philoctetes* and *Orestes*. In these cases, both the listeners and narrators are men: Philoctetes and Neoptolemus in the former and Orestes and Pilades in the latter. Given the specific features of this paper, we will concentrate only on those monologues, where protagonists are males.

The first monologue entitled *Agamemnon* (1996-1970) is a confession of a man tired of war. The listener of the protagonist (presumably Agamemnon) is a woman (presumably Clytemnestra), although none of them is directly named. The name Agamemnon is mentioned only in the title. Like other works, this one starts with a remark, in which the narrator tells about the pompous arrival and welcome of the commander-in-chief: A crowd assembled at the stairs of the palace covered with purple carpets greet the commander with shouting and yelling. Against the background of the shouting and yelling, a mad woman (presumably Cassandra) yells something in an unknown foreign language. Her yelling is so loud that it can be heard in the palace. The commander enters the palace, takes off his clothes, hangs his horse-hair helmet at the mirror, and addresses the woman (his wife), who is unbinding laces on her husband's shoes. The woman's scornful movements show her attitude towards the husband. The man tries to fondle her hair. The man expresses only warmth towards her, but she scornfully moves off her head and leaves her husband very soon.

The man troubled with endless shouting and yelling, asks the woman to order the crowd to calm down. The commander cannot understand why people are so happy and why they are shouting and yelling so loudly. He is tired and is not interested in anything. He asks his wife to prepare a bath for him, as the only thing he wants is to relax. He tells her to take the woman, who is yelling most loudly as a slave or nurse for his son, but she does not need her either. He does not even want his sceptre, as he finds it very heavy to carry.

The commander speaks about the vanity of war and vain bloodshed. He recalls his comrades in arms and episodes from the battlefields that seem senseless to him as well as all they fought for, even the immortalisation of their names. He is happy that he survived and did not share the fate of his comrades in arms: "I did not envy their death/If I glorified their heroism, I did so only in order/to conceal my secret gratitude for my being still alive albeit not a hero."

The protagonist then concentrates on the purple carpet and shares his feelings with the woman. He says that when he stepped on the carpet, his knees bent and the whole of his body shuddered. The man seems to foresee his death, but he does not intend to change anything and it seems that this is the best outcome. The woman seems to be in a hurry and the man also heads towards the bath without delay: "To the bath! To the bath! The water will get cold. It may already be cold. I am going and you stay. Stay! You do not need to come. Do you nevertheless want to come? All right, come then."

Action continues in the remark. The man enters the bathroom and the woman follows him. The mad woman can be heard yelling outside: "Inhabitants of Argos, a golden fish is in the net... A sword has been raised... Inhabitants of Argos..." The sound of trumpets covers the yelling of the woman. A young man enters the room with a blood-stained sword in his hand. He takes the helmet and puts it on back to front with the horsehair in the front serving as a mask. A woman follows the man. She is tall, beautiful, and proud. She looks into the mirror and tidies her hair. However, before doing that, she hangs a lifebuoy on the stairs with an inscription of the name of one of the Moerae - Lachesis. By pointing to this detail, the poet probably wanted to stress that whatever befalls people is their fate and they cannot escape their fate. The characters of *The Fourth Dimension* are precisely victims of the fate.

As we said above, neither the name of protagonist nor of any other character is mentioned in the monologue. However, Ritsos follows the plot of the myth so punctiliously that it is not at all difficult to identify them.² In addition to the plot of the myth, Ritsos uses all symbols linked to this specific myth about Atreides: the purple carpet, bath, net, and so forth. In addition, the action unfolds in Argos. The poet seems to have changed nothing in the plot, but of course, Ritsos' *Agamemnon* has nothing to do with Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The former is a man tired of life. He seems to analyse and admit his own mistakes, realising that death is the salvation for him. Therefore, being well aware of what awaits him, he makes no attempt to fight and change his fate, calmly taking the punishment. He has no force or desire to resist and he obediently reconciles himself with his fate.

² A. D. Skiadas believes that *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus is the source of *Agamemnon* by Ritsos. To support the idea, he points to numerous quotes, phrases, and passages similar to those in the ancient tragedy. Cf. Σκιαδάς Α. Δ., *Ο Αγαμέμνων του Γιάννη Ρίτσου*, in: *Αφιέρωμα στον Γιάννη Ρίτσο*, Κέδρος, Αθήνα 1981, 621.

Orestes (1962-1966).³ The remark makes it clear that action unfolds in modern era. In the evening, two young men (presumably Orestes and Pylades) approach gates with an image of lion. Cars and tour buses are nowhere to be seen. The friends suddenly hear a woman lamenting. It is at this moment that the monologue starts.

The pathos of the monologue is that the protagonist does not want to fulfil the "mission" imposed by "others". He is aware that he is not ready for it: "It is amazing that I have been prepared for this moment for all my life and now I realise that I am powerless." The text makes clear the protagonist's attitude towards his mother and sister. The former is always young, proud, and beautiful (Clytemnestra) and the latter has grown old early and is embittered (Electra) and will remain with nothing after she takes revenge: "I suppose that she is afraid of revenge, as she will remain with nothing". The protagonist does not conceal his love and admiration of his mother and his hatred of his sister, which makes him deprive of her life the person he loves more than anyone else. However, despite this attitude of the main character, we realise in the epilogue that the protagonist does fulfil his *function*: He enters the palace and a man's hoarse piercing voice followed by a woman's cry can be heard. The protagonist's "mission" is fulfilled. He is not courageous enough to fight against his fate. Lachesis acts here too. We encounter unconditional obedience to one's fate and inability to change one's life in other monologues by Ritsos.

Like in the previous monologue, characters are not named (only the protagonist's friend is compared with Pylades in the first remark), but it is not difficult to recognise the myth about Orestes, as the plot and elements of the myth remain unchanged for the exception of one aspect. It has already been said that the protagonist addresses his male friend in the monologue. His words make it clear that their friendship is much deeper than just friendship between two men. In the remark, the poet emphasises the friend's attitude towards Orestes: "As usual, he was caring and loyal like Pylades". There are several phrases in the text that enable such a conclusion: The protagonist tells his friend that he will not cut his own hair, as his friend often caressed it. He also says: "Give me your hand. Let us go"

³ Quite a number of works have been written on this monologue, but they mostly focus on Orestes' splitting in two - regarding his obligations on the one hand and his desire to live freely beyond the rules established by others on the other - reflects the splitting in two of the author: a poet in the claws of the Communist ideology on the one hand and a free man on the other. For details cf. Μηλιώνη Ν., *Ο Ορέστης του Γιάννη Ρίτσου και η αμφισβήτηση του χρέους*, περ. Το δέντρο, τεύχ. 169-170, Άνοιξη-Καλοκαίρι, Αθήνα 2009, 107-110.

or "Hold my hand. It is your hand... I can wholly entrust it only to you;"⁴
 "Let me kiss your smile for the last time / so long as I have my lips."⁵

It is known from history of literature that authors of various eras offer numerous interpretations of the image of Orestes. Back in ancient times, Orestes is presented as a person of weak will and a psychologically unbalanced and unstable young man. Likewise, in works written later, he is often depicted as a cowardly and irresolute person, who is unable to change his fate. However, we do not know any other case in addition to the aforementioned, where Orestes would be presented as a homosexual.

Ajax (1967-1969). The tragedy of the same title by Sophocles (more precisely, the first part of the tragedy up to the suicide of Ajax) is the source of this monologue. In this monologue, Ritsos is closer to the source as regards both the plot and structure. The monologue of Ajax is indeed one of the main passages in the tragedy by Sophocles. In addition, Ristos, when possible, presents in his work other characters of the tragedy by Sophocles: Tecmessa, the Messenger, and the team of sailors. *Ajax* differs from other monologues also in that other characters linked to the tragedy by Ajax are mentioned by their names: Teucrus, Achilles, Atreides, and Hector.⁶

In the prologue, the poet describes a horrific scene: A well-built and strong man lying on the floor amid killed animals⁷ and broken crockery.

⁴ "I do not want to cut my hair,/where your hand often used to roam. What a beautiful night./something like us, something that becomes longer independent of us and we listen to it as if it were a mysterious river finding its way to the sea" (*Orestes*, 74).

"Big nights, our full summer nights./crammed full with whipped stars, sweaty armpits, broken glasses... (*Orestes*, 81).

"You, my dear, are so patient in sharing/odd and stupid things, but I nevertheless give you my hand/and you should take it, as it belongs to you like I do. Take and hold it. You are waiting for it free of offense, punishment or memories./What I want is to own it fully and to dedicate it only to you. Forgive me for such secret solitude and compassion./You know it splits me in two. What a beautiful night" (*Orestes*, 81).

"Only the two of us will know that my body is nothing other than/a lykythos stuffed with ashes" (*Orestes*, 88).

"Let us go. The agreed time has come./Why are you smiling?/Do you agree with me?/Is this what you have understood, but never said?/This is a just end, isn't it?/After the most just battle?/Let me kiss your smile for the last time,/so long as I have my lips. Let me go now. I am aware of my fate. Let us go..." (*Orestes*, 89).

⁵ On eroticism in *The Fourth Dimension* cf. Θωμαδάκη Μ., Ο ερωτικός λόγος στον κύκλο των Ατρείδων του Γιάννη Ρίτσου, in: Αφιέρωμα στον ποιητή Γιάννη Ρίτσο, Νέα Εστία, Χριστούγεννα, Αθήνα 1991, 82-83.

⁶ As we could see, in other monologues, Ritsos avoids mentioning proper names, using them only in titles, and providing specific features of events.

⁷ With Sophocles, Ajax attacks cattle and with Ritsos, cats, dogs, chickens, and sheep are killed. This detail further diminishes the importance of Ritsos' character.

The man is wearing a torn blood-stained chiton. He looks tired and sobering up after as drinking in the previous night. A woman looking like a foreigner is standing at the door. She is presumably Tecmessa. She seems to be hiding someone behind her, presumably a little child. The man addresses the woman, looking in another direction. He speaks aloud with allusions about the tragedy that befell him. He says that Atreides treated him unjustly, although he was the one, who defeated Hector, but they did not give him Hector's weapons. He thought that he took revenge on Atreides, but he found himself in a shameful situation after the "revenge". Ajax is no longer interested in his glorious past, heroic deeds or the victory of his opponents. How long are they going to celebrate the victory? They will not need the stolen shield soon.

Like Sophocles, the author introduces gods here. Ajax "is no longer worried about the fallacy of gods." Ajax with Ritsos has the same attitude towards gods as Ajax with Sophocles. However, unlike Sophocles, Ritsos does not make it clear that it was gods, who led Ajax to suicide: Θεοὺς τέθηκ' αὐτός, οὐ κεινοῖσιν, οὐ (970) and that he was punished because of his pride and Hybris.⁸ Although Ajax of Ritsos also commits suicide, this is not said in his monologue.⁹ He uses another aspect – the lie of Ajax, which he says to calm his wife. Ajax tells Tecmessa that he is going to the river to wash and clean his dagger. In the epilogue, the Messenger (sailor) says that Ajax killed himself with the dagger.

Philoctetes (1963-1965). Like the previous monologue, this monologue is also based on the tragedy by Sophocles and is about the same period chronologically. In the article, where he makes a comparative analysis of the two tragedies (*Philoctetes* by Sophocles and *Philoctetes* by Ritsos), D. Maronitis writes that *Philoctetes* "is the boldest and most mysterious (enigmatic) theatrical monologue" in *The Fourth Dimension* by Ritsos.¹⁰ This monologue is different from others in that despite the name mentioned in the title, Neoptolemus is the protagonist of the work and Philoctetes is only his silent listener. Neoptolemus speaks and Philoctetes only listens.

As we said above, the source of the monologue is *Philoctetes* by Sophocles, but it is noteworthy that differences between the two works are

⁸ In this connection, cf. Gordeziani R., *Greek Literature*, Tbilisi 2009, 348 ff. (in Georgian).

⁹ Unlike Sophocles, Ritsos does not declare the decision of Ajax to commit suicide and then renounce the decision.

¹⁰ Μαρωνίτης Δ. Ν., *Από τον Φιλοκτήτη του Σοφοκλή στον Φιλοκτήτη του Γ. Ρίτσου*, in: *Εισαγωγή στην ποίηση του Ρίτσου*, Πανεπιστημιακές Εκδόσεις Κρήτης, Ηράκλειο 2009, 332.

more numerous than similarities. Ritsos is not interested in what befell Philoctetes, his incurable illness or the intrigues of Odysseus and the weapons of Heracles. He is interested in the spiritual state of Philoctetes and the perception of the deeds of previous generations by the young man (Neoptolemus). In the opinion of Maronitis, by changing and eliminating components of the plot of the tragedy by Sophocles, Ritsos tried to switch the emphasis from external actions to the internal state and violating the external structure of the myth, to search for interesting details in its depth.¹¹

Maronitis concentrates on the fact that addressing Philoctetes at the beginning of his speech, Neoptolemus uses first person plural three times. A confrontation between generations is effectively emphasized by the use of pronouns *we/you*: The old generation, which brought a lot of trouble together with glory, and the younger generation, which emerges as the heir and involuntary continuator of all this. Remaining in the shadow of his powerful father, Neoptolemus is dissatisfied with his lot, but he nevertheless deems himself bound to follow what the previous generation did.

The image of Philoctetes also undergoes an interesting metamorphosis in the monologue by Ritsos. In the work by Sophocles, he found himself on the abandoned island of Lemnos against his will, but Ritsos makes him choose his own fate: "You hung your shirt on the tree with your own hands/in order to deceive passers-by and make them say: "He has died", /and when you learned, hiding in the bushes, that you were regarded as dead,/you continued to live as you liked; and then/you again put on your fake shirt of death,/becoming the silence of your existence," Neoptolemus told Philoctetes. Thus, instead of being forced to remain alone on the island, Ritsos' Philoctetes remains there on his own free will, protecting himself from everything that was to happen to him, which his comrades in arms failed to do – disillusionment in endless wars. Maronitis thinks that Philoctetes was the best possible character for exiled Ritsos to express his sentiments.

The two monologues discussed above (*Ajax* and *Philoctetes*) enable us to draw a very interesting conclusion: Odysseus is the cause of "misfortunes" of both characters. Ajax is resentful of Odysseus, because Achilles' weapons fell to the latter as his lot, and Philoctetes is resentful, because it was Odysseus' initiative to leave him on the island. Correspondingly, Odysseus is a negative character in both cases. It is interesting how deliberately the poet did this. The problem is that Odysseus is never

¹¹ Op. cit., 334.

mentioned by his name in any of the monologues.¹² Moreover, he is not even implied anywhere. It is difficult to structure and narrate the story of these two characters in such a manner as not to mention the main wrongdoer, who brought about the situation, in which the two found themselves. Interestingly, Odysseus is almost completely absent in the works by Ritsos.¹³ Odysseus, who is so popular in the Modernist and Post-modernist European and Greek literature, gets no attention from Ritsos. What may be the reason? It seems that Ritsos deems exemplary a hero in the direct meaning of this word, but by no means a “πολυμήχανος” – an astute, flexible, and crafty man, who achieves his goals not in a sincere and uncompromising manner, but through astuteness, lies, and intrigues.¹⁴

As we said on a lot of occasions above, the pathos of *The Fourth Dimension* is to show the ephemeral nature and vanity of everything. In addition, Ritsos wants to show that humans are weak and despondent in the face of the laws of universe. In our opinion, Ritsos purposefully chose strong characters, mostly heroes, in ancient literature (except Orestes) to lay a stronger emphasis on the weakness of humans. The stronger a person is the more horrific is his fall. It is men, who were strong in the past, but found themselves in unenviable situations, who are characters of his monologues.

¹² As we could see above, unlike other monologues, the names of almost all characters linked to the tragedy of Ajax except Odysseus are mentioned in *Ajax*.

¹³ There are just several exceptions, but even in these cases, Ritsos (unlike Seferis) is always on the side of Odysseus' friends.

¹⁴ For the interpretation of the image of Odysseus cf. Tsanava R., *Images and Masks of Odyssey*, Tbilisi 2011.