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Medea as a Paradigmatic “Stranger” in the Context of Europe-Asia Opposition

Among the various opinions concerning the date and the reason of arising Europe/Asia opposition, the assumption, which relates the roots of this dichotomy with the Greek-Persian wars (VI-V c. BC), is one of the widespread opinions.¹ It is the period in the history of the civilization, when not only the new political distribution of the world order takes place, but the period, when the distinction between the different world outlook principles of these two worlds becomes clearly realized.² It is quite symptomatic that the famous historian of the V c. BC – Herodotus boldly speaks about the opposition between Europe and Asia (he uses the term *Hellen* for Europe and *Barbarian* for Asia) and presents the viewpoint concerning arising of the roots of this opposition (Her., I, 1-5).

Parallel to the sharpening of the confrontation Europe/Asia, the opposition between Greek and foreigner, called barbarian by the Greeks, acquires an extremely acute character in the artistic context of the classical Greece (V c. BC). This process is clearly revealed in the different genres of literature as well as in the various fields of fine arts. The responses of the aesthetic media to the political changes seemed to be quick and large-scale as they embrace the different forms of the expression – be it philosophical discussion of the reasons of the confrontation, historical-ethnological inquires in the dichotomy’s roots, cultural studies of the various people and what is very important – the interpretations of the artistic icons.

¹ According to other opinions the opposition was formed in: a) the Middle centuries; b) during New History Era.

² It is the period, when these opposing conceptions became clearly aware and not established. See Gordeziani R., *The Greek Civilization*, I, Tbilisi 1988, 8 ff.

In order to investigate the interrelation between the political sphere and the aesthetic media we considered especially fruitful to study the development of Medea's image. Our choice was caused mainly by two factors: first, the interrelation of the opposing concepts of Greek and barbarian plays an important role among the other oppositions of this complex mythic figure and second – this image quite remarkably presents the evolution of the interrelation between these two worlds, that of the West and the East. But what is even more interesting in Medea's persona from our point of view is one peculiar aspect of this relation/confrontation, namely: up to the certain moment the opposition Greek/barbarian is encapsulated within Medea's figure as she veers between Greek and barbarian, but after sharpening of this dichotomy, Medea herself becomes the member of the opposition – artists began to emphasize Medea's role as a foreigner. She becomes not only geographic, but the cultural "other" as well.³

Before discussing the development of the opposition Greek/barbarian in Medea's image, one circumstance should be noted. As scholars consider, it is somewhat unusual to see the opposing concepts within a single mythic figure as myths frequently express the dichotomy by presenting opposing characters.⁴ One has every right to ask what is the reason of this peculiar presentation, what factor causes Medea's veering between Greek and foreigner in the early sources? In our mind, this unusual phenomenon should have been related with the functions of the members of Medea's genealogical line.

Almost whole her kinship group – starting from her grandfather Helios – embodies the interrelation between the East and the West. Helios or Sun is the mediator between the members of the opposition East/West as he starts his every day journey from the East to the West (not from the South to the North) and then circulating returns back. This movement of Helios neutralizes the opposition. In ancient mythology the descendants of Helios move in accordance to sun's journey.⁵ For example, the dwelling of Aeetes' sister Circe according to Homer is in the East (*Od.*, XI, 3-4). It is Hesiod, who puts Circe's dwelling in the West. According to him the sons of Odysseus and Circe rule over the Tirseniens, i. e. he places Circe's dwelling in Etruscan country (*Hes., Theog.*, 1011 ff.). The settling of Aeetes' second sister – Pasiphae is also in the West, on Crete. Aeetes' brother

³ Medea, ed. by Clauss J. and Jonston S., Princeton 1997, 8.

⁴ Medea, 1997, 8.

⁵ Erkomaishvili M., *The Myth of Kirke and its Interpretation in the Ancient Literature*, Tbilisi 2002.

Perses lives in the West too – on the north-west coast of the Black Sea. Aeetes himself plays not a least part in movements of east/west directions characteristic of his family group. According to the author of the VIII c. BC Eumelus of Corinth he is the ruler of Ephyra (the late Corinth). He voluntarily entrusts it to Bounus to guard until one of the members of his line returns to Ephyra and leaves himself for Colchis (Eum. Fr. 2K). These traditional movements of Medea’s relatives acquire even more intense character in Medea’s mythic life. According to the same Eumelus the Corinthians bereft of the ruler invite Medea, who had come to Iolcus from Colchis to rule upon them. Jason becomes the king as her husband, through her (Eum. Fr. 3K). Simonides also calls Jason the co-ruler of Medea (Sim. Fr. 31 PMG). Medea’s life in Corinth, the death of her children independently of Medea (or without her will), the yearly sacrifices in honor of Medea’s children, the introduction of the rites of Hera Acraia by Medea are attested in the various ancient sources. Such close links of Medea with Corinth made the scholars suggest, that: a) Medea’s cult in Corinth should have been a local one;⁶ b) Medea should have been an original local goddess;⁷ c) there should have existed two separate mythic cycles of Medea: one about the Corinthian, the second about the Colchian-Iolcean Medea.⁸ After Corinth, according to the sources, Medea arrives at Athens and from Athens she flees to the East – either she comes to the land of Arians/Medes⁹ or according to other versions – returns back to Colchis (Apoll., I, 9, 28; Ius., *Epit.*, XLII, 2; Tac., *Ann.*, VI, 3 4).¹⁰ It is interesting to note, that evidences of Medea’s withdrawal to the East come from the later sources, that of the V c. BC and the later ones, what not only doesn’t seem accidental, but are to be explained by changing of the political vectors in Europe/Asia relationship.

The most important artistic images of Medea presenting her veering between a Greek and a foreigner are her early portraits depicted in Pindar’s IV *Pythian Ode* and in Euripides’ tragedy *Medea*. The Greek vase painting is especially interesting in this connection. The artists present Medea in traditional Greek clothing as well as in oriental costume – thus

⁶ Huxly G. M., *Greek Epic Poetry from Eumelos to Panyassis*, London 1969, 61.

⁷ Nilsson M. P., *Griechische Feste von religiöser Bedeutung*, Berlin 1906, 57.

⁸ Lesky A., *Medeia*, RE 15, 1931, 29-65, 48.

⁹ First attested in Herodotus (Her., VII, 62). We see Medea as an eponymous hero in Paus., II, 3, 8. According to Strabo the eponym of Medians in one case is Medea, in another Medos (Str., XI, 13, 10).

¹⁰ See also Lesky, 1931.

displaying her ambiguity towards the value systems of two worlds.¹¹

Pindar's Medea in the beginning of the poem together with "black-visaged" Colchians stands in the opposite cultural milieu of the civilized Greek heroes. By calling the Colchians "black-visaged" Pindar indicates the immense cultural divide that separates Jason's people from Medea's. Here, for Jason to accomplish Aetes' hard tasks, he has to rob Medea of shame for her parents and must burn a passion for Hellas in Medea's heart. Note, that the poet puts the stress on Medea's passion for Hellas, rather than for Jason himself. As O' Higgins notes, one can hardly overstate the importance of the passion, that made Hellas so irresistible to Medea.¹²

Medea's wavering between the East and the West value systems is one of the main points of Euripides' famous tragedy *Medea*, the tragedy, which played a crucial role in creating the archetypal model of Medea. The debate if she can be considered a figure relevant to the problems of the Athenian society has a long history. The reason of treating her as a person irrelevant to the Athenian social problems was her oriental, barbarian origin and her witchcraft.¹³ Unfortunately, the limited space of the article does not give us possibility to discuss in details the ambiguous portrayal of Medea in this respect. Just to sum up, we can only note the following: Medea is acquainted with Greek culture and its values up to certain extent. After betraying her Jason still expects from her the ordinary obedience of a Greek wife. Yes, he reminds Medea her barbarian origin during their first meeting, but in the whole context of the meeting this seems to belong already to Medea's past. Her foreign origin does not prevent her comprehension as a person being acquainted with a Greek value system. During the play the chorus of the Corinthian women does not consider her as a person alien to them. They sympathize with her and do not raise an objection until they hear her dreadful plan.

As we noted above, towards the late V c. BC the crucial transformation takes place in the artistic interpretations of Medea. She becomes a paradigmatic outsider, from the geographic stranger Medea turns into the cultural "other" in the land of Greece. This transformation is revealed in the following patterns: a) Medea starts to play a crucial role in fulfilling

¹¹ Sourvenou-Inwood C., *Medea at a Shifting Distance: Images and Euripidean Tragedy*, 253-297, in: *Medea*, 1997.

¹² O'Higgins D. M., *Medea as a Muse: Pindar's Pythian IV*, 103-127, in: *Medea*, 1997, 119 ff.

¹³ For discussing these aspects of Euripides' *Medea* see Knox B. M. W., *The Medea of Euripides*, YCLS 25 1979, 193-225, 216 ff.; Also Nadareishvili K., *Woman in Classical Era and Greek Tragedy*, Tbilisi 2008.

successfully Jason’s labors and while doing it step by step becomes a horrible, destructive force, from expert in drugs – pharmakeutria she turns into a manipulative witch able to control the cosmic forces; b) She commits unheard crimes, kills her own children; c) Medea becomes to be characterized with the larger specter of the negative traits and the artists tend to emphasize her values as the distinct from the Greek ones.

If we consider chronologically the development of Medea’s role in Jason’s deeds performed in Colchis, we’ll see how greatly her function is changed in this episode. In the early sources Medea doesn’t take part in fulfilling Jason’s heroic tasks (*Carmen Naupacticum*, Herodorus). The passive role of Medea in this episode we can see in fine arts of the early period – the vase paintings depicting Jason and a dragon do not present Medea.¹⁴ It is Pindar who makes Medea’s help crucial in fulfilling Jason’s goals in Colchis. Medea is called the woman, who knows all healing arts (Pind., *Pyth.* IV, 223). Her pharmaceutical skills serve Jason’s purposes, still the poet does not accentuate Medea’s magic, as he strives to present her in another dimension – as a persona being a prophet and having an “immortal mouth” (Pind., *Pyth.* IV, 11).

For the first time Medea as a witch in Colchean episode is presented by the poet of the IV c. BC – Apollonius of Rhodes. In his poem Medea is a witch possessing an extraordinary power to manipulate even with the cosmic forces. His version became canonical for the later writers while interpreting this episode.

If in the Colchian episode the treatment of Medea as a witch begins towards the end of the V c. BC and chronologically fully coincides with the period, when Medea is already perceived as a separate member of the dichotomy – Greek/barbarian, the tales about miracles of Jason’s and Aeson’s rejuvenation in Iolcus existed already in the oldest strata of the myth (*Nostoi*, Fr. 7PEG I: FGr H3F113; Sim. Fr. 548PMG). Many vase paintings, dating from the late VI c. BC onward portray this episode of Medea’s Myth. Therefore, presentation of Medea as a witch in the Iolcian story of the oldest version is an exception in the main tendency of the development of this aspect of Medea’s persona.¹⁵ Though it must be noted, that the tales of rejuvenation of Jason and Aeson – the stories of Medea’s witchcraft in the oldest sources were bereft of the negative

¹⁴ Lordkipanidze N., *The Depiction of Argonauts’ Myth in Early Greek Culture*, Tbilisi 2004, 40-48.

¹⁵ This exceptional pattern can really be connected with ancient comprehension of Thesaly (Iolcus) as the classical region of witchcraft in Greece. See Lesky, 1931.

connotation. The contrast of such presentation of Medea to the later ones can be seen on the example of Ovid, who presents Medea not only as a powerful witch, but also as a figure who had lost any human characteristics (Ovid., *Meth.*, VII).

Another question is the interpretation of the murder of Pelias by his own daughters, tricked by Medea to do so in order to rejuvenate him. An author of the early V c. BC – Pherecydes tells the story of Pelias' murder, though he does not mention the magical context of this act (*Pherec.*, FGrH3F105). "The murderer of Pelias" is what Pindar calls Medea (Pind., *Pyth.*, IV, 250), again without speaking of Medea's witchcraft.

It seems that it was Euripides, who first presented Medea as instructing the daughters of Pelias fruitless rejuvenation techniques that resulted in their father's death.¹⁶ The later tradition, as a rule, not only follows Euripides' version, but presents this murder in the extremely dark colors. In those stories Medea does not have any motivation while avenging Pelias (Ovid., *Meth.*, VII, 297 ff.; Hyg., *Fab.*, XXIV).

Medea's witchcraft is not depicted in the early versions of her Corinthian story. In one variant version Hera promises Medea to immortalize her children, but for the reasons unknown to us, fails to do it and the children die. In second version Medea leaves the children in the temenos of Hera and flees from Corinth. Corinthians kill the children. According to Graf, herbal magic was not her concern – and far less magic of any other kind. Just the opposite: whereas Medea we meet in Iolcus could rejuvenate Aeson, the Corinthian Medea failed to immortalize her own children.¹⁷

As we have mentioned above, in perceiving Medea as a cultural "other", the terrible crimes ascribed to her played an important role. The sources of the different period present different interpretations of these deeds. Pherecydes, the earliest author, describing the murder of Medea's brother Apsyrtos does not mention the performer of this act by the name. More, in his account the deed is performed not by the agent, but agents. These agents can be: a) The Argonauts; b) The Argonauts and Medea; c) Jason and Medea, but by no means Medea alone (FGr Hist 3F 32). Euripides' tragedy *Medea* is chronologically the first source, in which

¹⁶ The story should have been played out in the lost tragedy *Peliades*. Sophocles' *Rhizotomoi* described Medea as gathering maleficent herbs and doing some witchcraft having some kind of connection with Pelias' murder; though in the fragments known to us we do not find any mention of *Peliades*.

¹⁷ Graf F., *Medea, The Enchantress from Afar: Remarks on a Well-known Myth*, 21-44, in: *Medea*, 1997, 35.

Medea is named as Apsyrtos’ killer. It is noteworthy, that the date of the production of this tragedy is the very period, when above opposition becomes especially sharp. The majority of the later sources also ascribe Apsyrtos’ murder to Medea, though there is another version of the murder, where the actual performer of the deed is Jason, though the treacherous plan of the killing is invented by Medea (Ap. Rh., *Arg.*, IV).

Now we’ll briefly touch the myth of the death of Medea’s children. In the oldest strata of this myth Medea is: a) either involuntarily killing her children by hiding them in the temenos of Hera in order to make them immortal (Eum. Fr. 3K), or b) She leaves the children in Hera’s temenos and herself flees to Athens, and afterwards the Corinthians kill them (Schol. Eur., *Med.*, 264). Again, it is Euripides, who makes Medea the voluntary murderer of her children to avenge Jason. This version afterwards becomes also canonical in interpreting of this episode of Medea’s biography. Euripides’ tragedy *Medea* turns Medea’s image into an archetypical model of the mother-murderer avenging matrimonial betrayal. Still, the authors of the later period are well aware with the early versions of this mythos as well as they know quite well the evidence, according to which the killing of the children by mother herself was Euripides’ innovation (Paus., II, 3, 6-7; Philost., *Her.*, 53, 4; Diod., IV, 55).

In so called Athenian story Medea’s another treacherous deed, namely her attempt to kill her stepson Theseus is related. According to the scholars, this myth can not be taken much further back than to the “Theseis” of the late VI c. BC.¹⁸ Therefore, Medea becomes guilty in one more heinous crime approximately in the same period, when the tension between a Greek and a barbarian acquires acute character.

We have mentioned above, that after V c. BC Medea (or her son Medos) becomes the eponymous hero of the Medes. As it is suggested in the modern scholarship, the Medes (Medians) are not mentioned in the Greek sources before VI c. BC. West has explained that this myth need not be older than the change from Madoi to Medoi in Ionic-Attic. Thus, perceiving Medea as an eponymous hero of the Medes in the Greek sources is again closely connected with the period, when the above opposition became especially distinct. The Greeks needed, that the Medes should have had an eponymous hero and they suggested Medea to be an appropriate candidate because of her name, because she was barbarian and coming approximately from the same part of the world.¹⁹

¹⁸ Medea, 1997, 36 ff.

¹⁹ Medea, 1997, 38.

The diachronic study of the main episodes of Medea's mythic biography revealed, that the development of Medea's image was much influenced by the changing of the political vectors in the relationship of the West and the East. Playing the crucial role in Jason's heroic deeds and from simple expert in drugs becoming the omnipotent witch, performing the terrible acts of the brother and children murder, killing Pelias by the hands of his own daughters, naturally created the certain collection of her character traits, which caused her negative comprehension.

All these data of the development of Medea's image, it seems to us, revealed how close connection there was between a political and an aesthetic contexts, how sensitive was culture in a whole to the changes taking place in the political sphere and how quick and large-scale were the responses of aesthetic media.