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MEDEA IN MODERN GREEK DRAMATURGY

In the 1990s, after a long period of silence, Modern Greek playwrights started to take vigorous interest in the themes about Medea. The following plays featuring Medea were composed in the mentioned period: Bost's *Medea* (1993), a comedy, however unexpected this may sound, Kharis Lambidis' *Who Killed Medeas' Children* (1981), Vasilis Boundouris' *Another Medea* (1990), Maria Kekou's *Medea, The Snake-Handed Fury of Passions* composed in the same year, Vasilis Zioghas' *Medea* (1995) and two short plays by Konstantinos Bouras *Medea in Athens* and *Medea's Death* (1997). The present paper will focus on the plays by Kharis Lambidis, Vasilis Boundouris, Maria Kekou and Vasilis Zioghas, as they are closer to each other in terms of their genre affiliation.

Greek authors attempt to present the well-known myth through their own interpretation, although they fall short of being original. While modern world features Medea in a bold modernist light and often even sounds most unexpected and scandalous with regard to Medea, Greek playwrights go on paving their way through the labyrinths of numerous mythological versions, confining themselves to philological researches accomplished in belles-lettres style.

The plays of my immediate interest are not based only on the Euripidean tradition. The authors make synthesis of various sources and present the conclusion which they find acceptable. For the first time following so many centuries, Kharis Lambidis and Vasilis Boundouris relieve Medea of the shameful libel of her own children's murderer in an attempt to restore historical justice. Thus they rehabilitate Medea, one of the last representatives of the matriarchal world, who patriarchate has kept throughout centuries entangled in the maze of slander in pursuit of hiding away its own shabbiness. As concerns Maria Kekou's and Vasilis Zioghas' Medeas, they take after the Euripidean heroine and deprive their children of life by themselves; however, the

fact of child-slaughter is veiled in metaphysical obscurity and is presented as a symbolic killing to be treated in philosophical terms, rather than as the vengeance by a coldhearted murderer.

Modern Greek playwrights take particular interest in Eumelos' tradition (later replicated by Pausanias), which presents Medea as the rightful heir to the Corinthian throne, and although sources say nothing about Medea's Corinthian origin, Greek dramatists make use of this very aspect, enriching the centuries-hardened symbolic image with new traits. Namely, they regard Medea's arrival in Corinth not as something accidental, but as a thoroughly premeditated step and offer the portrait of a politically active woman, acceptable for the feminism-ridden 20th century. In this regard, Vasilis Boundouris' drama *Another Medea* is especially significant. In the preface to the play, Vasilis Boundouris admits to being a secret supporter of matriarchate, and states that his play is aimed not only at destroying the murderous image of Medea created by Euripides the Woman-Hater, but also at rendering the proud feelings of the women who protested against injustice and criminal nature of patriarchal society.[1]

The author achieves his goal presenting Medea as a genuinely feminist woman, whose soul is not burdened with appalling crimes. However, the play leaves an impression that despite the bold statements, the author nevertheless supports the stand of the masculine half of the world, and attempts to convey the following message: A woman who is desperate for freedom and power loses the image of a desired woman, which results in her female tragedy; besides, Boundouris' Medea is not completely discharged from the responsibility of killing her children. Apart from blaming Medea in her own ill fate, Boundouris ascribes the child-slaughter to her excessively ambitious nature, thus leaving her the murderer of her own children in an indirect way.

Kharis Lambidis' *Who Killed Medea's Children* is also written after Eumelos' tradition. The Drama is altogether realistic in terms of its plot; the author generalizes Medea's story and touches the problems that could freely come up in any society of any period. Similarly to Boundouris' play, Lambidis' Medea also claims her rights to the Corinthian throne. However, this is no more a mere struggle for power on the part of an ambitious woman; this is the protest of an idealist woman against injustice, the protest of a woman who despite her personal adversity, retains good reason and succeeds in uniting society against tyranny. In my opinion, Lambidis attempted to use Medea's image to show how one may become a victim of one's own ideals. Medea's initial mistake was her taking Jason, a stranger from a remote land, who at first sight seemed to be seeking adventures, for Mr. Right (or rather Mr.

[1] Β. Μπουντούρης, Η Άλλη Μήδεια, εκδόσεις Γκοβόστη, 1990, 8.

Knight) and her falling in love with him. However, the reality proved absolutely different as soon as she left Colchis. After Jason failed to justify Medea's expectations, she started to mould a hero of him by herself. The task proved rather tiresome for both, which drove their relations to a deadlock.

Lambidis' Medea is a feminist, like Boundouris' character. However, unlike her counterpart, she feels that she loses interest in life and struggle without Jason and asks him to come back. Lambidis' Medea does everything for the sake of love and tries to restore justice for the sake of her husband's and children's future. Her tragedy lies in her excessive wishes, which collide with the interests of more powerful individuals, and as a result, she loses her future together with her love.

Maria Kekou's *Medea, The Snake-Handed Fury of Passions* was composed after Euripides' play. However, in the introductory note to one of its editions, the author writes: 'In this particular play, Medea and Jason are a very modern couple from the neighboring apartment, whose family conflict reveals the everlasting clash between sexes and is lost in the depths of the prehistoric period.'[2]

Maria Kekou's play does not aim to comment on Medea's behavior or add new traits to her image; it simply once again reminds us that archetypes are everlasting and can be found at any time and in any place. The difference lies only in details, which are trifle and unable to change the essence of the story. The author states: 'Medea's myth can fit any period, as it points to and warns against the danger of extreme liberty of woman as a negative archetype.'[3]

Vasilis Zioghas' Medea is quite a complex play. Apart from being a playwright, its author takes a vigorous interest in ancient philosophy and various religions, which had great impact on his works and even puzzles the reader. *Medea* abounds of quite unexpected symbols. For example, the chorus is replaced here by no less that The Trinity, which, however, is the unity of pagan goddesses. Medea is the daughter of God the Creator, borne to him by a mortal woman as a human to live an earthly life. Medea takes both of her children back to her womb and, exhausted with awful pains, commits suicide; then she transforms into a single unity and sets off towards the eternity. Medea's last words imply an interesting allusion to the New Testament: 'Why hast thou forsaken me, Father?'

Since such fragments may takes us far away and considering the time-limit, I will fail anyway to give appropriate answers to all relevant questions, I will only attempt to comment on how Zioghas understands Medea.

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[2] Μ. Κέκκου, Μήδεια, η οφιοπλόκαμη ερινύα των πόθων, εκδόσεις Υπατία, 1990, 15.
[3] Μ. Κέκκου, Μήδεια, η οφιοπλόκαμη ερινύα των πόθων, εκδόσεις Υπατία, 1990, 14.

Although the plot is well-known at first sight, Zioghas succeeds in presenting everything from a different angle. He regards the hacking up of Absyrtus as a divine game, symbolically conveying the idea of Medea's giving up her own past. According to her own words, Medea did evil only to herself, while the human eye perceived the fact as an appalling murder. Medea is a goddess, and unlike her above-described counterparts, gives up not only the royal but also the divine throne for Jason's sake, starts to live an average mortal's life and is satisfied with the least. Medea is full of love; she loves people although they are afraid of her. Medea loves Jason despite his unfaithfulness, and is unable to do him any harm; moreover, the goddess is ready to give up her immortality provided Jason is with her. But the divine patience also has limits; on the verge of her endurance and enraged with the misery of mortals, she abandons the earthly life and takes her children away with her to keep them away from injustice. Zioghas offers an interesting interpretation of Medea's image. Unlike other dramas, the central character of Zioghas' play is omnipotent and capable of attaining her aim by a mere thought. However, she is most helpless and most feminine, and at the same time as she is ready for love with all her being. She is the symbol of a woman-wife who does her best not to wound her husband's pride by exposing her powers; she even forgets about her faculties and cries as an average woman when she is in trouble. Medea is the symbol of a woman-mother, who is affectionate and caring with her little children, her decisions are not selfish – she does not go wherever she wishes, but after a long meditation and conflict with her own self, she decides to take them away from the infinite evil of the humankind. In my mind, Vasilis Zioghas, who keeps closest to the Euripidean tradition, is anyway Medea's most vigorous advocate, perceiving her primarily as a tender woman.

The overview of the four dramas enabled me to make some conclusions: For some unknown reasons, the highlighting of Medea's theme in Modern Greek dramaturgy coincides with the growth of the Georgian Diaspora in Greece, and again for certain reasons, some Greek playwrights accentuate Medea's Greek origin. Besides, although some of the authors try to liberate her from the shameful label of murderous mother, they unintentionally remain the followers of the existing tradition, and their efforts are limited to loud and bold words. For example, Vasilis Boundouris writes in the preface to his play that after Euripides wrote *Medea*, no one on the earth has ever given this name to their child; such a statement sounds queer if we consider that out of the six members of the Chair of Modern Greek Studies of our Institute, two are called Medea.

Greek playwrights widely use the Medea theme to promote feminist ideas. However, Greek authors' fondness for feminism is a bit strange if we bear in mind that since the 1990s and on, women have been most active in every field