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THE ETHNIC ASPECT OF PERCEPTION OF MEDEA AND HELEN

Medea has been discussed at the conference in many different ways. A number of interesting ideas have been expressed about the interpretations of her image in different periods and literatures. I will try to analyze the same character from a slightly different ethno-social angle. I will also draw a parallel with another mythological character – Helen, and with the public attitude towards her.

Medea and Helen are two very popular images, which have always invited controversial opinions in European culture.

It is common knowledge that ancient literature treated two versions of the Helen myth. The first one finds Helen guilty, while second one presents her as a victim. However, even Helen's obvious 'misconduct' (the first version) invites various attitudes: 1. Helen was unfaithful to her husband and followed Paris, which means that she behaved inappropriately and deserves censure (Hesiod, Aeschylus, Euripides, Ovid, Seneca, Virgil, Alceus), 2. Helen was unfaithful to her husband, but it was not her fault (Gorgias, Socrates) and 3. Helen was unfaithful to her husband and she did it right (Sappho). In the second version, Helen is innocent, naturally, as she has not even been in Troy (Euripides, Stesichorus).¹ The reception of Helen's images in the 19th-20th century literature is no less diverse. Modern European authors present her in many different ways.² Unlike European literature, Modern Greek writing is

¹ For the interpretation of Helen's image in antiquity see RE, VII, 2, 2824-2835; RML; DNP, 5, 278-280.

² For the interpretation of Helen's image in European literature see Frenzel E., *Die Stoffe der Weltliteratur*, Stuttgart, 1981, 301-306.

quite biased towards this character. Greek authors mainly picture Helen in light colors and even try to acquit her.³

Modern Greeks regard Helen as the symbol of national pride. Helen embodies the absolute worldly beauty and consequently, she renders what is the most important in modern times for the perception of Greek civilization – beauty and harmony. Unlike their ancient forefathers, the tendency for censuring Helen almost equals to a zero point and clearly prevails what, unflattering for we may call the idealization of Helen's image. In Greek

³ Helen first appeared in Modern Greek writing in 1899. The text belonged to Kostas Palamas, a distinguished poet and public figure of those times. The poem is quite small, and is epigraphed with a few lines from Euripides' *Helen* (33-36), which points to the myth version referred to. The poem is a certain 'autobiographic' account: a woman tells the story of her genealogy, narrates how the Trojan War started because Paris abducted a shadow created by the gods, etc. The ending lines of the poem are devoted to the full rehabilitation of Helen: 'I am untouchable, pure, unattainable. I am Helen.'

In about the same period (1956) the famous Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis dwells in his *Report to Greco* on the story of how Stesychorus created 'Palynodia'. He finds quite convincing the second version of the myth and interprets the events in his own way: he ascribes Stesychorus' taking back his words to his reason.

Another Greek apology of Helen is the poet Angelos Sikelianos. He frequently refers to her image in his poem; however, the mythic character is presented as the symbol of beauty and her other aspects are not highlighted. In 1919 Sikelianos published quite a sizeable, 32-line poem called *A Hymn to Helen*, where Helen is in fact presented as the equal of gods. In the poem *Heraclides*, Sikelianos gives Goethe a good scolding for portraying Helen in a unflattering role: how could a German poet dare such a blasphemy!

Helen reappeared in Greek prose after a 30-year pause. Now she is dedicated a poem by a modernist poet, a Nobel Prize winner George Seferis (*Helen*, 1953). He intended to show the absurdity of war rather than rehabilitate Helen's image. Like his predecessors, Seferis used the second version of the myth. Already the epigrammatic part of the poem cites the words from Euripides' *Helen* pointing out that it was not she who went to Troy but her shadow.

Helen's image is widely used in the works of another modernist poet Takis Sinopoulos. In 1957 he published a poem called *Helen*. In fact, the whole poem is the confession of a poet in love with Helen. The epithets referring to Helen emphasize not only her beauty (beautiful, fair, unseen, airy, etc.), but also her purity: untouched, unattainable, uncorrupted, virgin, high, all-bright, untarnished, etc. This poem is especially remarkable as it is the first occasion in Modern Greek writing that Helen is identified with no less than Hellas openly and emphatically.

Iannis Ritsos offered an altogether different interpretation of Helen's image. In 1970, Ritsos used the devices characteristic of European literature to create play-monologue *Helen*, where the popular mythic character is pictured in an strange, unusual context. This is a monologue of an elderly and forgotten once-fair Helen. The acting character, as well as all the characters she mentions, is deheroized. Despite the most natural description of old and miserable Helen and her being, Ritsos nevertheless puts emphasis on, and I could even say, worships Helen's past beauty. Helen, already fairly old, remembers that all what happened was the divine will: 'There was no use to watch them [Paris and Menelaus]. The gods had predetermined the outcome of the war. And after a while, Paris, washed by the goddess and smiling, awaited me lying on my bed ...' (see Shamanidi S., Fair Helen, The Cause of the War or an Innocent Victim, Kutaisi, 2003, 320ff. (in Georgian)).

literature, her beauty rendered irrelevant all what could smear her image in this way or other.

As concerns Medea, it is common knowledge that two stages have been distinguished in the attitude towards her – pre-Euripidean and post-Euripidean. There is no instance of negative attitude in pre-Euripidean texts, while post-Euripidean literature is dominated by a definitely negative image (but for the exceptions where Euripides is accused of taking a bribe and inventing a lie).⁴

European literature is distinguished by a definitely controversial attitude to Medea – some authors present her as a character with the most appalling, negative functions, while others try to exonerate her: as a rule, such texts are based on feminist principles.⁵

Similarly to Greek writers' attitude to Helen, modern Georgian literature is quite biased when interpreting Medea's image and does not spare efforts to relieve her of the murderous reputation.

The Medea theme was introduced in Georgian literature by Akaki Tsereteli. He wrote a play called *Media* (Me + Dia meaning I + a female, woman), which was at first designed as a trilogy: *Media in Colchis*, *Media in Hellas* and *Media Back in Homeland*. However, the initial idea failed to be implemented and the poet published in 1875 only the first part of it called *Media*. He referred to Apollonius' *Argonautica* as the source for his play; however, the title he gave to the plot describing the events in Colchis was the same as that of the Euripidean play. This leads to the thought that the poet evidently wished to depict already in this poem the events taking place in Colchis and on the other hand, to create a certain exposition for a better presentation of Medea and in order to prepare the reader to the changes (in the mythic plot as well as in Medea's image) forthcoming in the remaining part of the trilogy. We may suppose that the second play was intended to imply reference with Euripides' *Medea*, while the third play would probably be fostered by the poet's own imagination. Evidently, Medea's return to her homeland aimed at her complete rehabilitation and at neutralizing the motivation of her leaving Colchis. The play renders unaltered all key points of the Argonauts' visit to Colchis; however, the motivations are principally modified. All acquire a new context. In order to provide 'grounded'

⁴ For the interpretation of Medea's image in antiquity, see RE, XV, 1, 28-65; RML; DNP, 7, 1091-1093; Gordeziani R., *Argonauts*, Tbilisi, 2007 (in Georgian).

⁵ For the interpretation of Medea's image in modern European literature, see Frenzel E., *Die Stoffe der Weltliteratur*, Stuttgart, 1981, 482-486; Modern Greek Playwrights' interest in Medea remarkably increased by the end of the 20th century. Around 10 plays were devoted to the Medea theme in the 1990s. For more details, see the following articles in this volume: I. Darchia, Bost's *Medea*; K. Tsintsadze, *Medea in Modern Greek Dramaturgy*.

arguments against the Euripidean version, the author had to start the narrative from the point when Medea and Jason first met in Colchis. Each scene of Medea's and Jason's meeting show that Jason deceives her. The poet tried to accentuate Medea's 'naivety' and Jason's perfidy, thus providing in advance for all necessary implications aimed at holding Jason unquestionably responsible for all bound to happen in future.

Another Georgian writer to treat the Medea theme in dramatic terms is Levan Sanikidze. Being at the same a historian he was well aware of ancient sources regarding the Argonaut legend as well as modern European interpretations of it. Levan Sanikidze followed Akaki Tsereteli's principle of rehabilitating Medea, and even went further than his predecessor: he presented Medea as the best wife, an extremely caring mother, as a deeply Philhellenic person, whose help to the Greek people was not limited to the medical sphere, as before each battle she used to give her husband the plans for military activities and consequently, was the guarantee for Jason's ever-victorious campaigns. However, the ungrateful Greeks treated her in an appalling way: they murdered her children and intended to kill her as well. Differently from all ancient traditional stories, Sanikidze's play ends with a suicide – Medea sets on fire her house, her garden and is wrapped in flames herself.

Levan Sanikidze's *Medea* was performed on the Georgian stage many times: between 1962 and 1984 the play was staged in seven theaters of Georgia, while in 1997, it was even staged in the Opera House under the name *The Colchian Daughter* (composed by B. Kvernadze, libretto by L. Sanikidze).⁶

The Medea theme reappeared in Georgian literature several times: I can mention *Aetes* by Valerian Kandelaki (1975). Although it does not even feature Medea as a heroine, other characters' words clearly suggest the author's attitude to Medea.

Another piece of literature devoted to Medea is Giorgi Kornapeli's poem *Medea*. It is also aimed at the rehabilitation of her image. The poet refers to Medea with the following epithets: tortured, doomed, the victim, bewitched. Evidently, the author ascribes her deeds to libido: 'The spell oozed through the belt of the virgin.'

⁶ If we bear in mind that Euripidean *Medea* was staged in Georgia only once, and involved many difficulties, as it became possible only after a serious psychological preparation of the actors and public (at first, Veriko Anjaparidze even refused to play Medea's part), it becomes clear why the theme of Medea's rehabilitation is so relevant to Georgian society. Probably, the outstanding popularity of Sanikidze's *Medea* in Georgia was conditioned by this very fact, rather than its dramatic value.

Several years ago *Medea* again appeared in one of Tbilisi theater halls. This time it was staged by a young director Gocha Kapanadze. Although the author of this stage version must have been aware not only of the Euripidean tragedy, but also of many various modern receptions of it, he nevertheless failed to escape the Georgian tradition of interpreting Medea's image and the influence of his immediate predecessors. Already the advertising leaflet included the names of the ancient Greek authors who denied Medea's involvement in the appalling murders and ascribed her ill fame to Euripides' fancy. Naturally, this pathos was rendered in the play as well. The performance is opened by the Chorus, which functions as the Messenger. We learn from the Chorus's part that the Corinthians not only killed Medea's children, but also bribed Euripides in order to 'rescue the image of the Hellenes' and blame Medea for all!

I can not help pointing to the author's endeavor to accentuate the foreign origin of Medea and Circe (Medea's aunt and one of Odysseus' lovers): Medea complains that she has forgotten the Colchian language and asks her to speak to her in Colchian, which is followed by Circe's part in the Mengrelian language. Apart from this, Medea performs Mengrelian *Nana (Lullaby)* after her dialogue with Jason.

In the final monologue, Medea tears the books (evidently, Euripides), which she believes tell a lie: 'Miserable Euripides, may you be cursed! Why do not you tell the world the true story: how the violent Corinthian mob hacked up my children in the Heraion; how you took five golds, how you embellished your head with a laurel wreath and went up the pedestal of the Olympus, how you became the first tragedian of Hellas. And made me the murderer of my children ...', 'I have not slaughtered my children, haven't, haven't! ...' The Mengrelian *Nana* can again be heard in the finale. It could be a logical ending to the prologue but for one point: Medea kills her children herself and even provides an explanation for her behavior: 'I will immediately implement the appalling intention. Otherwise, I will leave my children to the enemy. It makes no difference; they will not be able to escape death. They would better be deprived of life by their own mother.' I believe that this very aspect – the discrepancy between Medea's deeds and her appreciations – is the original finding of the director and even proves innovative as concerns the interpretation of Medea's image. However, the above-mentioned also attests that although the director has Medea kill her children with her own hands, he nevertheless is unable to resist the temptation of presenting the facts that point to the opposite and to exonerate his heroine.

Quite recently, director Levan Tsuladze staged in the Musical Comedy Theater Akaki Khidasheli's play called *The Colchian Sex*. The play does not

mention Medea's children at all, and the main focus is absolutely different, as can be expected from the title.

The above-mentioned attests that if the attitude towards Helen and Medea these is more or less balanced in world literature – some finding them guilty, and others exonerating them – the literature of those nations who identify themselves with the heroines is quite biased. Bearing this in mind, I wanted to find out the public attitude towards these characters, especially among such a sensitive community as the students. For this purpose, I carried out the following experiment:

For several years, I gave a course of lectures *Ancient Tradition and Modern Literature* to Georgian and Greek students. The lectures accentuated the reception of Helen's and Medea's images in modern literature. Although European literature has diverse attitude to them as mentioned above, the functions of these two ladies are negative rather than positive. If we attempt to define their personalities with a couple of words, we will presumably use the definition 'unfaithful wife' in the first case and 'murderous mother' in the second one.

The experiment was carried out in the following way: Georgian and Greek students were to answer the questions 'Is Medea guilty or not?' and 'Is Helen guilty or not' with just one word, either 'yes' or 'no'. 95% of Georgian students gave a negative answer to the first question, and a positive answer to the second one. We had the same picture with the Greek students, but in the reverse way: 100% percent found Medea guilty, while none of them blamed Helen.

The Greek students tried their best to exonerate Helen and provided many different arguments in her favor. The same was true about the Georgian students, who advocated Medea. Part of students denied Medea's killing her children, attributing this fact to Euripides' fancy, while others, although admitting the murder, tried to defend her saying that when a person is deeply humiliated, they may be do anything. The majority of my students are Orthodox Christians, and many of them are church-goers. So, I wanted to find out how they appreciated her action in terms of Christian morality. The answer was highly surprising: – that's all right but Medea was pagan, wasn't she.

Although both Medea and Helen are mythical characters and our contemporary society is no more supposed to identify themselves with a particular character, the genetic memory of people proves very lasting. It sometimes makes a person experience unconsciously the deeds of their ancestors, either heroic or vice versa. And if the deed is unworthy, they may try their best to exonerate the character. Recently, a monument was erected to Medea in Batumi. The public response was very sharp. People protested in

every possible way: through essays in newspapers, television speeches, demonstrations – as they believe that a monument should not be erected to the children-murderer. At any lecture and in any program devoted to an ancient theme the following question will inevitably come up: Did Medea really kill her children? Even the television screening of Pasolini's *Medea* provoked newspaper essays – not critical, but pathetic – this time, Pasolini was the target of contempt, and Medea was again defended. Medea as a character went beyond the domain of fiction and art. If we take Georgian example, her behavior is discussed in the way as if she were a real historical individual and not a mythological or literary character, and her deed is appreciated as something blemishing our national consciousness. I can add in the end that such circumstances one again speak of Euripides' genius, whose creation excites our souls even 25 centuries later.