

Maka Kamushadze (Tbilisi)

MEDEA IN A. EMBIRIKOS' *ARGO OR AEROSTAT FLIGHT*

Andreas Embirikos, a well-known Greek surrealist poet offers another interesting interpretation of the Argonaut theme in his prose work *Argo or Aerostat Flight*.

The writer does not follow the story-line of the myth, as it could be expected, but offers an interesting attempt of surrealistic interpretation of the myth. Various lexical units, characters and scenes, chaotically scattered in the work, allude to the Argonauts' voyage and the tragic story of Jason and Medea.

The plot of Andreas Embirikos' work follows two story-lines. The first is the family drama of a history lecturer of the Santa Fe De Bogotá University, and the second is the flight of the aerostat Argo. In the present paper, I will not dwell on how the pathos of the entire Argonaut legend is rendered in the work; neither will I focus on its psychoanalytical aspect. The objective of the paper is to find out if the work reflects Medea's image, and if so, comment on the Embirikos' interpretation of the mythical character. It is very important to bear in mind that *Argo or Aerostat Flight* is a surrealistic work, where the subconscious is more important than the conscious, and where associative thought prevails. However, the subconscious does not necessarily mean ununderstandable, existing somewhere beyond logics. Much of what represents the product of the subconscious in an artistic work is definitely perceptible, irrespective of whether the process of its artistic accomplishment is prevailed by a logical or intuitive principle. We can see there beauty as well as sense, and receive semantic as well as aesthetic information.

It should be stated from the very start that neither of the so-called characters of the work is directly and unambiguously related to Medea. In my opinion, Medea's image is reflected in all the six female characters of the work. Each of them is associated either with a particular character trait of the

traditional mythical image, or with one of the motifs of her story. In my opinion, eight associative elements can be singled out in Embirikos' work: 1. Woman's affection for the man who is unacceptable for her parents; 2. Woman's relationship with the world of plants; 3. Unfaithfulness and jealousy; 4. Sister-and-brother relationship; 5. The call against murdering the innocent; 6 Prophetic gift; 7. Abduction of a woman with the *Argo*; 8. Miraculous ascension to the sky. Now let us consider how these motifs are developed in the work and what associations they may stir.

1. One of the central characters of the work is an eighteen-year-old Columbian girl, Carlotta, the daughter of Don Pedro Ramirez, who is in love with her neighbour, a rich farmer Pablo Gonzalez. Although Carlotta's father is categorically against their love, the girl goes on seeing Pablo. Her father threatens that if she does not stop seeing him, he will take her back to the convent. Besides, Carlotta's father does not allow her to attend the most significant celebration of the city, the flight of the *Argo*.

In this particular case, Carlotta is associated with Medea, who falls in love with Jason. Pablo Gonzalez, the ineligible suitor in the eyes of Carlotta's father, is associated with Jason, who came to Aeetes with unfriendly intentions. Carlotta, who goes against her father's will, resembles Medea, who betrayed her father.

2. Every time when Carlotta appears in the story, she is either holding a bunch of flowers in her hands, or is surrounded with flowers. "Dressed in a loose skirt, and holding a bunch of flowers in her hands, she was running to him"¹, "... the branches of trees and bushes swiftly filled up with flowers and birds and fruit, and eighteen-year-old Carlotta – as the girl has now become Carlotta – stood beneath the trees and waited as Donna Isabella."² The setting for love relations between Carlotta and Pablo, and for her death, is the garden, the hay-stack.³ Carlotta's world, filled with flowers and plants, may also be associated with Medea, whom the goddess Hecate taught how to prepare magic drugs. Owing to this divine knowledge, Medea is intrinsically linked with the world of plants in ancient tradition.

3. Another significant female character of the work is Isabella, Carlotta's mother and Don Pedro Ramirez' wife, who died young from some disease. The author characterizes her as a jealous wife. However, Isabella' jealousy is not ungrounded as Don Pedro is notorious for his love affairs. In this case, parallels can be drawn between Isabella, abandoned by Don Pedro, and Me-

¹ Α. Εμπεϊρικός, *Αργώ ή πλους αεροστάτου*, ύψιλον/βιβλία, 1980, 14.

² *Ibid.*, 28-29.

³ Α. Εμπεϊρικός, *Αργώ ή πλους αεροστάτου*, ύψιλον/βιβλία, 1980, 67.

dea, abandoned by Jason." ... You pretend, you say you love her and play the role of a lover with the woman whom you do not love any more"⁴ – these are the thoughts of Don Pedro Ramirez, whose love for his wife has faded away. At a certain stage, he realizes that he does not love his wife Isabella any more – analogically with Jason, who, after years of happy life with Medea, decides to break up his family ties and marry Creusa, the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth. In my opinion, this episode accentuates the motif of husband's unfaithfulness and loss of love for one's wife, which reminds of Euripides' tragedy.

4. A female image of relatively less significance is a fifteen-year-old acrobatess, who performed acrobatic tricks at the ceremony of the flight and attracted people's attention. However, the majority of the crowd was viewing the gigantic sphere. Interestingly, the girl was accompanied with her brother, who was playing the tambourine. The acrobatess and her brother may be related to the 'sister-and-brother' theme of the Argonaut legend. They may be associated with Medea and Apsyrtus, who on Aeetes' order pursued Medea after she left Colchis together with the Argonauts.

5. Another female character of the work is a likewise fifteen-year-old girl, who attended the ceremony. When a photographer took up a camera to take a picture of the people on board the Argo, she shrieked in a desperate voice: 'Don't kill, don't kill ... they are innocent', and fell down unconscious. In my mind, this quite unexpected yell is the repercussion of the scene of child-slaughter in Euripides' tragedy.⁵

Another female character is an old matchmaker, who emerges from the crowd gathered at the ceremony and prophesies an earth-quake in Santa Fe De Bogotá. In my opinion, this scene is associated with Medea's prophetic gift, which is clearly presented in the Forth Pythian Ode of Pindar: 'Hear me, sons of great-hearted men and gods. I declare that one day from this sea-beaten land the daughter of Epaphos will have planted within her a root of famous cities at the foundations of Zeus Ammon.'⁶

6. Likewise noteworthy is the image of Marianna, who is not in fact a real character – she is the fruit of Ernesto Larie-Nanse's imagination. Ernesto is a Frenchman, who is among the people on board the Argo. She is a prostitute, who asks the Frenchman to kill two peasants, and promises to stay with him

⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵ Euripides, *Medea*, Everyman's Library, The Plays of Euripides in English, translated by M. Wodhull, 1934, 111.

⁶ Pindar, *Olympian Odes, Pythian Odes*, The Fourth Pythian Ode, 14-15, the Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, University Press, 2002.

overnight. Marianna, existing in Ernesto's imagination, can be associated with vengeance and the murder of Creon and his daughter. Three interesting details can be singled out: the requirement to kill the peasant women, the death of a man in black and Marianna's words 'I will show them who the real whore is ...'. Marianna's wish to have the peasant women killed is motivated by her desire to revenge. This phrase can be related to quite a number of words from Euripides' *Medea* expressing Medea's haughtiness.

7. Another important character of the work is a fifteen-year-old girl with chocolate-colour complexion, an inmate of a children's asylum, who is also attending the ceremony. She presents a Russian admiral, Verkhoi, with a parrot sitting in a cage on behalf of the inmates of the asylum. The admiral on his part takes her up in his arms, kisses her and gives her a golden watch. He is so fascinated with the girl that as the *Argo* is taking up, he jumps out, seizes the girl and takes her with him to the *Argo*. This episode stirs miscellaneous associations: the golden watch and the Golden Fleece, the *Aerostat Argo* and the ship *Argo*, the *Argo's* flying up to the sky, and the chariot of Helios, the *Aerostat Argo* takes away a woman, which may be the repercussion of the abduction of Medea with the *Argo*, while the ascension of the chocolate-colour girl, sitting in the *Aerostat*, can be associated with the Euripidean scene when a chariot sent by Helios carries away Medea and her dead children.⁷ It is not difficult to trace parallels between the girl and Medea as well as between admiral Verkhoi and Jason.

So, Medea can be regarded as the prototype of the female characters of *Argo or Aerostat Flight* by A. Embirikos. The mythological image is presented through various aspects. Very often, the character of Embirikos' work is not even mentioned by name. Even an almost unknown, peripheral character can stir associations with Medea. Carlotta in love and Medea in love – the choice of both is unacceptable for their fathers; Carlotta's and Medea's relationship with plants; the acrobatess and her brother – Medea and Apsyrtus; the chocolate-colour girl, abducted by the Russian admiral, and Medea taken away by Jason; jealous Isabella and jealous Medea, both abandoned, as their husbands' love for them has faded away; vengeful and haughty Medea and Marianna. Although Medea is not mentioned in Embirikos' work, all the female images of it imply certain elements or motifs, the unity of which is related to the integrated image of Euripides' *Medea*. All key aspects of Medea's image can be found in the six female characters of the work; although the author does not repeat the story of Medea and Jason, the impression it leaves is definitely associated with the myth. The application of

⁷ Euripides, *Medea*, 1934, 112.

particular traits of the single image of Medea to several characters does not appear unnatural for the surrealist principle of thought.

The work of Embirikos unites the elements, which although do not make up a single logical context, are anyway distinguished for their clearly expressed definiteness, which I would even call their mimetic nature. A. Embirikos' *Argo or Aerostat Flight* is another proof to attest to the idea that in his creations, associative links may be distinct and even systemic, as Embirikos amply presented the traits and motifs related to the traditional image of Medea through the female characters of the work.