

Irine Darchia (Tbilisi)

SOME ARTISTIC PECULIARITIES OF BOST'S *MEDEA*

Euripides' *Medea* left an indelible mark on human thinking and had greatest impact on world literature and art. *Medea* remains an inexhaustible source of inspiration for many artists, and as a true literary masterpiece, offers many possibilities of interpretation. In my article I will dwell on *Medea* by Bost, a contemporary Greek writer. Being popular and appreciated in modern Greek literary and dramatic circles, he is less known to the European reader and almost unknown to the Georgian public.

First, I would like to say a few words about the author himself. Christos (Mentis) Bostandzoglou – known under the pen-name Bost – was born in Constantinople in 1918. In 1939, he moved together with his family to Athens, where he died in 1995. He studied some 6 months in the High School of Art. Bost is known as an illustrator of books and journals, as a political cartoonist, an artist and a stage designer, as well as an author of up to 10 plays, whose paintings were exhibited 16 times. When talking about Bost, I cannot help mentioning his shop "ΛΑΪΚΑΙ ΕΙΚΟΝΑΙ" – "Folk Images", which sold various utensils embellished by his original paintings. He is said to have painted over 27 000 objects and either sold them or given away as a gift. By the way, I learned about Bost's *Medea* quite by chance, when I was visiting one Greek family where I saw an ash-tray painted by him and a few oil paintings, and inquired about their author.

Bost's *Medea* invites comprehensive studies in many different aspects: its reference to ancient Greek tradition and to the modern interpretations of the Argonaut myth, including those by Greek authors; the place of the play in the modern Greek literature; its artistic – genre, dramatic and conceptual – peculiarities, Bost's *Medea* on the Greek stage and its prospects at the international level. In my article I will dwell on some artistic peculiarities of Bost's play.

First of all, I should mention that Bost's *Medea* is not only a modern interpretation of Euripides' *Medea*; it is also a comedy. The characters of the play essentially differ from those of Euripides' tragedy; namely, apart from Medea, Jason, the nurse, the messenger, the Choripheus and Chorus, here are a nun and a monk, a fisherman, Oedipus, Antigone and Euripides. The latter is the character of Aristophanes' comedies, which in their turn were evidently the source for Bost.

The plot of Bost's play is essentially different from Euripides' tragedy. It repeats the gist (a Barbarian, Colchian woman finds herself in the Hellenic civilized society and in the end, enraged, kills her own children). However, this very popular story is developed in a way that is totally different from the ancient tradition.

The well-known love-story of Medea and Jason, supplemented with several other story-lines, runs throughout the whole work. The author presents a nun Polixenes (Polly) and her former love, Yannis, who, disappointed with his unanswered love, is suspected of sexual lust for young boys, including Medea's sons. Medea offered shelter to the nun Polly and afterwards regretted this as Polixenes is loved either by her husband Jason, or her sons. Meanwhile, blind Oedipus appears in the company of his daughter Antigone. He complains about unemployment, attempts to secure the position of a cashier in a bank, and in disappointment decides to earn his bread as a street musician. Euripides asks Medea for help – he is writing a play and wants to consult the Colchian woman on the ways of enriching the plot in order to earn the approval of a special drama committee.

The most essential aspect which sets Bost's *Medea* apart from the ancient tragedy is the motivation for the children's murder.

"Λέγω να σφάζω τα παιδιά, να φύγουν απ' τη μέση
να κάνω ένα έγκλημα ώστε να τον πονέσει."

"So, I will kill my children,
commit a crime to offend Jason."

In the conclusive sonnet of the play, Medea and Jason sing a duet, commenting on the motivation of child-slaughter: as they didn't do well at school, taking interest in nothing but a bed, and love affair with the nun and the monk, their mother punished them by killing them.

"Οι πιο κακοί οι μαθηταί ήταν αυτοί στην τάξη
γι' αυτό κ' η μάνα τους καλά έκανε να τα σφάξει.
Δεν έπαιρναν τα γράμματα πηγαίνοντας σχολείο
και το μυαλό τους είχανε στις μοναχής το αιδούο."

"They were the worst students in the class,
Therefore, their mother was right to kill them.
They went to school but did not study,
The nun's pudenda drove them mad."

In his works, including *Medea*, Bost jumbles up various epochs, historical events and characters of different periods, which brings into Bostandzoglou's plays the elements of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Even without reading the work, a mere account of the plot suffices to realize that a tragedy transformed into a comedy is modified not only with regard to its genre, story-line and style, but in conceptual terms as well. The well-known mythological plot is demoralized, the problem is essentially transformed and is entirely set in a political and social context, acquiring a comic, or rather satirical and grotesque colouring.

The play prompts the question: Why did Bost decide exactly on Euripides' *Medea*? What accounts for the relevance of the challenges conveyed by this ancient tragedy?

Euripides *Medea* fully grasps the complex psychological processes taking place in the spiritual world of a character; it offers masterly composed emotional monologues, dialogues – examples of rhetorical art, the so-called verbal Agons with Sophistic implications, extensive parts of the messenger, intrigues. *Medea* is the drama of marital relationships and morally corrupted society, the society which justifies depravity. This is the tragedy of betraying one's parents and homeland, of being fugitive and lonely in a strange land, of disappointment and lost love, the tragedy of socially and emotionally unprotected woman.¹

Bost's *Medea* features the motif of marital relations, disappointment, lost love and unfaithfulness, but in a lesser degree. We may say that the social dimension takes over private life and the world of emotions.

Bost' play also uses the theme of loneliness and fugitive being in a strange land, but the modern Greek writer shifts the focus. What the play highlights is rather the attitude of one part of Greek society than the adversities of an emigrant's life. The ancient Greek antinomy: the Hellene – the Barbarian is relevant in modern Greece as well.

And most importantly, Bost's *Medea* portrays the drama of a morally corrupted society in satirical terms, the society where immorality is justified: the decay of spiritual values, the depravity of monks, provinciality as well as xenophobia of the Greek society, belief in one's own cultural superiority and Utopian nationalistic ideas; the pragmatism of marital relations and

¹ Darchia I., *Colour Phenomenon in Greek Tragedy*, Logos, Tbilisi 2006 (Monograph in Georgian with summaries in English and Greek), 163.

anticipation of material profit instead of genuine feelings; luxurious life and the building of the future with bank loans and credits; pseudo-promotion of gender equality and social pseudo-guarantees, when a doctor expects an envelope with an additional fee from a patient; looking for the dominance of one particular nation, and belief that those who speak their language will be privileged; bringing up the youth spoiled and idle, the cult of diploma, lack and depreciation of genuine education and knowledge; superficiality and the pursuit of appearances, unemployment at large, promotion through telephone calls and connections; the veil of vigorous democratic ideas over monarchist or imperial or in general terms, outdated intentions, the sudden transformation of "kings" into Democrats; hosts of victims to leisure or festive steering wheel; the search for the way out from spiritual crises and social deadlocks through the consultations with psychologists and psychiatrists.

By the way, Bostandzoglou was frequently persecuted and oppressed. Being a left-winger, he nevertheless tried to remain unbiased, as illustrated in his *Medea*. Bost is derisive at right-wingers as well as pseudo-democratic left-wingers.

I cannot agree with Greek critics who maintain that "Bost's original way of writing, *Medea's* tragicomic image, Aristophanes' metaphors and confusion discloses the evil of his contemporary Greek society",² as the Greece of Bost's *Medea* very closely resembles modern Georgia.

Bostandzoglou's *Medea* is regarded as one of the most funny plays of Greek dramatic repertoire, as "when the performance is over, spectators head for their homes with laughter"; while the playwright himself wanted "to have them laugh rather than guffaw". Bost's irony is difficult to discern, his satire is naive as an infant, his humour is tender and purposeful. That is why he is regarded as a complicated comediograph.

Admittedly, laugh can be caused by different impulses – invective, or derision, a mimic scene, grotesque look, profanity and so on. Bost's *Medea* includes all of these devices. Bost mocks at everything and everybody – every layer and circle of society. He criticizes but at the same time loves and believes in his country.

The playwright does not describe the appearance and dresses of the characters. However, he designs the stage set and costumes which convey his conceptions regarding *Medea* and Jason, Oedipus and Antigone, the nun and the monk. *Medea* and *Antigone* are dressed in indiscreet gowns decorated with pseudo-ancient ornaments, Jason is cled in a military uniform with

² Κωνσταντινίδης Θ., Ο Μποστ και η *Μήδεια* του, Πρόλογος στην 100^η παράσταση στο Θέατρο "Στοά", 15-4-94, Ανάτυπο από το Περιοδικό ΕΜΒΟΛΙΜΟΝ, τ. 23-24, 1994-1995, Άσπρα Σπίτια Βοιωτίας, 6.

modern epaulets up the waist and a short toga with ancient ornaments down the waist, Oedipus wears black John Lennon glasses and resembles a blind or roving pop or rock musician, so widespread nowadays. The appearance of the nurse, with a laurel diadem on her head, is inspired by the pathetic images of the Roman period. The nun's dress discloses high-heeled shoes and prostitute's net-like socks, and her headwear resembles a helmet of the Soviet military.

The object of laughter are the costumes and images of the characters as well as their words, particular scenes and episodes, and the whole plot. One should not be surprised at Bost's rude jokes, obscene words and expressions. According to Aristotle, the core of comedy is the phallic vocabulary. The modern Greek playwright is obscene like Aristophanes and offends "the tender ear of elitist society".

"Κι αν πεταχθείτε στο σχολειό και μόνη σας θα δήτε
 με πόσην άνεσιν κ' οι δυό λένε ΑΓΑΜΟΙ ΘΥΤΑΙ...
 Οι μαθηταί εις το σχολειό οφείλουν να πηγαίνουν
 κι' όσοι πηδούν και τους πηδούν, είδατε τι παθαίνουν.
 Φροντίστε όσο είν' καιρός τώρα να μελετάτε
 κι' έχετε όλο τον καιρό ύστερα να πηδάτε."

Remarkably, after the publication of *My Mother's Profession* in the 1960s, Bost was severely criticized for "crossing the limits of decency and politeness". I will specially dwell on the linguistic aspect of the play. Similarly to Bost's other works, *Medea* is written with the 15-syllabic meter, and is rhymed with homonyms, which is possible in Modern Greek. In Greek language, the words with similar pronunciation are spelled differently and refer to different things. This very peculiarity of Bost's *Medea* was among the principle factors that would cause confusion and laughter. For example, the Cretan and the critic are pronounced analogically, but are spelled differently, which causes a great deal of confusion. Bost achieves a surprising laughter effect through the wordplay:

"Σαν νέος άνθρωπος κι εγώ κι αθώο θηλυκό
 στην Κρήτη έμπλεξα λοιπόν με κάποιον Κρητικό
 αλλά για τύχη μου κακή, αυτός ο Κρητικός
 εκτός που ήταν Κρητικός ήταν και Κριτικός."

"As a young and innocent lady
 in Crete I came across a Cretan,
 but to my regret,
 that Cretan was also a critic."

Although Bost's play abounds of such examples, I will confine myself only to the following fragment:

"Ὅπως γνωρίζεις, Μήδεια, δεν αγαπώ τα μύδια
 άλλωστε πριν, ετσίμπησα στιφάδο με κρεμμύδια
 κι αν φάγω τώρα μύδια, αγαπητή μου Μήδεια
 θα με πειράξουν φοβερά τα επί πλέον μύδια."

"As you may know Medea, I dislike mussels,
 Besides, I have just had some beef with garlic,
 And, my dear Medea, if I eat mussels now,
 They will make me feel bad."

Among the literary peculiarities of Bostandzoglou is believed to be an orthographically, morphologically and syntactically inaccurate writing. According to the stage director, Thanasis Papageorgiou, "one of the most literate writers found a shelter in orthographic errors, which he used to describe the illiteracy reigning around".³ *Medea* too abounds of such cases. I will cite only one fragment including wordplay and spelling mistakes.

"τυφλός δεν είναι απ' την Τυφλίδα
 μ' απ' το χωριό μας τον Κωλονό."

"The blind is not from Tbilisi,
 He is from our Colonus."

Bost's *Medea* implies irony, used already by Euripides. The great tragedian could render ironical everything: the manner of depicting characters, plot development, the world of gods, and *deus ex machina*, political events and rituals reflected in the work, and what is the most important, his dialogues.

The words of one of the conversers are ambiguous. The other character understands them literary, which makes him/her feel safe and anticipate benevolence of the person he/she is talking with. However, the audience grasps the implications of those words and anticipates a disaster (let us recall the dialogues between Medea and Jason, Lycus and Amphitruon, Pentheus and Dionysus, Hecabe and Polymestor and so on, the dialogues full of ambiguity and tragic irony). Euripides' characters pronounce the words that do not mean anything negative at first sight, but convey an implicit message of the pondering sorrow.⁴

³ See also: Βοσταντζόγλου Κ., *Ολίγα λόγια διά τον κύριον Βοσταντζόγλου, τον καλλιτέχνη και τον άνθρωπον*, in: Μποστ, *Μήδεια*, Θεατρική Εταιρία "Στοά", Εικοστή Τρίτη Θεατρική Περίοδος, 1993-1994, 12-14.

⁴ Darchia I., *op. cit.*, 268.

One of the passages from Bost's *Medea* – in particular, the dialogue between Medea and Yannis – has the same implications. The monk admits that the sole target of his passion were the schoolboys. He says that he has recently started a love affair with two boys who work in a post-office, and whom he attempts to seduce with money and sweets. Medea uncompromisingly censures the parents of those boys, who failed to look after their children and declares that in their place, she would kill both children. This very dialogue implicitly alludes to the tragedy which is bound to happen: after Medea finds out about her two son's affair with the monk, she slaughters them. So, Bost renders this "tragic" finale of the comedy with the help of Euripidean tragic irony.

By the way, Bostandzoglou's play has one more trait of a tragedy: the functions of Chorus and Messenger. Chorus appears in the play at a time, either telling in advance about the further events or appreciating what has already happened. So, it is charged with the function of rendering public opinion, like the Chorus of the tragedy. I should accentuate that following the principle of ancient tragedy, Bost's *Medea* does not kill her children right on the stage; it is the messenger who gives a detailed account of the murder.

As far as I know, Bost's *Medea* is among the rarest cases, if not the only one, of the comic interpretation of the Argonaut myth, where Medea dooms her sons to death not because of Jason's unfaithfulness, but because of their misbehaviour. So, Bost's play can be regarded as Aristophanean interpretation of Euripides' *Medea*. And it is not accidental that Bost is referred to as modern Aristophanes, a Modern Greek writer carrying on the tradition of ancient comedy.⁵

Medea's transformation into a comedy should not be much surprising. Although Aristotle called it the most tragic tragedy (*Poetica*, 1453, a29), tragedy as a genre implies a subtle comic potential. Let us recall that new Attic comedy borrowed from Euripides the devices of making a guess, cunningness and craftiness. The ending of the *Iphigenia among the Taurians* is not quite typical of tragedies, and besides, the play proceeds without sacrifices. The play abounds of tragic as well as comic elements, which assigns it to the mean between the tragedy and the comedy.⁶

Tragic and comic elements also converge in Euripides' *Helen*. This even prompts scholars not to regard it as a tragedy. *Helen* is appreciated as a tragic-comedy equaling a farce for the abundance of tragic irony. *Helen* is the drama where the author's imagination competes with the traditional myth, and this "fabulous and fanciful game" is regarded as the origin of Menander's comedy

⁵ Κωνσταντινίδης Θ., op. cit., 11.

⁶ Darchia I., op. cit., 209.

and ancient novel, as a melodramatic work. By the way, even *Ion* is appreciated as a tragicomedy by some scholars.⁷

Greek critics regard Bost in different ways. On the one hand, he is praised and respected, and recognized as the legend of Greek drama, and on the other hand, he is criticized. Regrettably, I could not find out how he is regarded by European scholars and therefore, I cannot be aware of how Bost is appreciated in the West.

As far as I know, Bost's *Medea* is frequently staged in Greece by professional as well as amateur artists. For the first time, it was staged by Thanasis Papageorgiou in the "Stoa" in 1993. Papers wrote on that occasion: "The most hilarious play of demonic Bost was staged by Papageorgiou, the most satanic among the satanic". *Medea* was staged this year as well, by Stamatis Fassoulis.

And finally, it is interesting what attitude this play will encounter in Georgia, how it will be accepted by the Georgian reader, whether it will establish itself on the Georgian stage or not, and how Georgian literary and drama critics will appreciate it. These questions will be answered in the future, when Bost's *Medea* will resound in Georgian.

⁷ Darchia I., op. cit., 225.