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EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*: SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE NATURE OF EURIPIDEAN HEROINE

It is a long time that the specialists of Classical Philology have been discussing the magical power and oriental barbarism of Medea in Euripides' tragedy of the same name. A number of scholars, who claimed, that Euripidean Medea was a sorceress and an oriental barbarian went so far as to exclude Medea altogether from the social context of the author's time. (Though the declaration of Medea's magical power and barbarism as a main component of this character didn't mean, that for them Medea wasn't a tragic human heroine at all). It appears to be a bit curious conception taking into consideration, that Euripides was regarded as a "carrier of feminist ideas" mainly due to the artistic interpretation of Medea. For instance in Grube's opinion although in her programmatic speech Medea is speaking as a fifth-century woman, further scenes bring to the fore another aspects of Medea's character: the sorceress and barbaric side.¹ Schmid writes: "den lässt der Dichter noch wissen, dass sie als barbarin eine Tat verüben konnte, der eine Griechin nicht fähig gewesen wäre und das die Täterin eine Zauberin ist, d.h. er stellt sie ausserhalb des Kreises normaler griechischer Weiblichkeit".²

Conacher and Lesky held more moderate position in the interpretation of Medea from this viewpoint; E.g. Lesky considered that although Medea's witchcraft had its place in the development of the heroine's story, Euripides tried to make his audience forget a witch in favour of an individual.³ Conacher writes, "Pre-Euripidean Medea showed little affinity with the tragic or even with heroic type... while denying her neither her fury nor her magic,

¹ Grube G. M. A., *The Drama of Euripides*, London 1941, 153-154.

² Schmid W., – Stählin O., *Geschichte der griechischen Literatur*, B. III, München 1940, 360.

³ Lesky A., *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*, Göttingen 1972, 147.

he yet makes her a woman of stature, of potentially tragic power".⁴ Yet the scholar interprets Medea as a sorceress and a barbarian together with a tragic human individual. In the very stimulating article "The *Medea* of Euripides" Knox criticized such an attitude toward Euripidean Medea. In his opinion the dramatist hardly mentions the popular story of Medea's sorcery (rejuvenation/murder of Pelias) and when he does it, it is described simply in the blandest of terms, it is described simply as a murder - "I killed Pelias the most painful way to die, at the hands of his own daughters" (Med. 486 ff.) – without any of the sensational details.⁵ According to Knox until the end of the play, when she herself is transformed into some kind of superhuman being, she is merely a helpless betrayed wife and mother. She has only two resources: cunning and poison.⁶

On the other hand there are scholars, who completely deny the magic power of the daughter of Aetes. Here is an example of such consideration: "Scholars are wrong in thinking, that Medea is a madwoman, an incarnate witch, a woman possessed of a daemon. For Euripides she is a pure woman, but woman at the mercy of her own destructive powers, wounded in the weakest and most sensitive part of her nature".⁷ Euripidean Medea's human, normal aspects have been emphasized in German (and more rarely Italian) literature. For instance, Rohdich speaks about the difficulties occurring before Euripides, when he tried to free Medea from so-called "monstrous" image of the tradition and place her in a category of normal women.⁸ Together with Knox we assume, that such an attitude goes too far in the opposite direction. Medea undoubtedly is an exceptional, extraordinary woman, different from the others. This difference is achieved with the help of certain aspects, which are called magic by some of the specialists, though we prefer to characterize them by the more delicate term "inhuman aspects" and which at the end of the play make Medea something more than human. And then main thing is to reveal the scale and the importance of this very aspect in the Euripidean heroine. For this aim we tried to discuss the passages of the play, which provide us at least with some information about the magic power of the Colchian princess.

First of all the information about Medea's sorcery should have been found in the monologue of the Nurse, where the Nurse tells the audience the past story of her lady, story of her just before Jason abandoned her. But there is

⁴ Conacher D.J., *Euripidean Drama; Myth, Theme and Structure*, Toronto 1967, 186.

⁵ Knox B. M. W., 'The *Medea* of Euripides' in (edd.) Gould T. F., Herington C. J., *Greek Tragedy*, YCLS, 25, 1979, 193-225, 214.

⁶ Knox, 1979, 214.

⁷ Musurillo H., *Euripides' Medea: A Reconsideration*, AJP, v. 87, №1, 1966, 52-74, 73.

⁸ Rohdich H., *Die Euripideische Tragödie, Untersuchungen zu ihrer Tragik*, Heidelberg 1968, 44-46.

everything – story of love, loyalty, betrayal of the motherland, Medea's emotions and misfortunes after Jason's treachery – everything except her sorcery. The Nurse just briefly mentions Pelias' murder here and it is presented as a fact without any magic context (Med. 8-10).

The second passage of our interest is undoubtedly the scene of Creon's and Medea's meeting. The king of Corinth is afraid of Medea as Medea is threatening to kill her daughter. Creon believes, that Medea can really fulfill her threat, as she is a wise woman – σοφή πέφυκας and knows much evil – κακῶν πολλῶν ὕδρις (Med. 285). His phrase is a clear argument for the scholars, who argue Medea's witchcraft. And indeed by the term σοφία Creon implies the very knowledge, which helped Jason to escape from Colchis and which murdered Pelias. Creon remembers Medea's past story well enough. Medea herself admits that she is "σοφή", though what she speaks about was a "new intellectual, enlightened outlook of the great sophistic teachers and generation they taught", as Knox explains.⁹ But this "σοφία" (intellectual outlook) was scary too for the Athenian society, for Creon and others. For her aims Medea uses the scary nature of "these knowledges", the trait they have in common and on this ground mixes the magic knowledge implied by Creon with the intellectual one. The manipulation is done so skillfully, that Creon can't even realize that the discussion was turned to the different subject. However, this is a real hint at Medea's magic power. The audience should not forget, that Medea is not an ordinary woman (she could have made such an impression in the previous scene talking to the Corinthian women), but something more.

The next passage reminding us of Medea's witchcraft is the scene of her first meeting with Jason. Here the heroine's sorcery is not only just briefly told. Here Medea herself speaks about it and furiously reminds her treacherous husband of the deeds she has done for his sake: "I saved thee .../Thee sent to quell the flame-outbreathing bulls/ with yoke-bands, and to sow the tilth of death. / The dragon, warder of the Fleece of Gold/ that sleepless kept it with his manifold coils/ I slew, and raised deliverance light for thee" (Med. 470 ff.) Undoubtedly the folk-tale witch is presented here before the audience. To defeat the dragon, to subdue the fire-breathing bulls, to sew the dragon's teeth are by all means the characteristics of sorcery, magic.

The scene of the meeting with Aegeus presents spectators with an extraordinary wisdom of this woman. The audience should be impressed by the respect the king shows toward Medea. In Conacher's opinion Aegeus doesn't

⁹ Knox, 1979, 212.

speak in the tone which one reserves for a witch doctor. Medea's utterances acquire a sort of brisk professionalism and are completely different in tone from other speeches (esp. Med. 672-86). Throughout the play only here is Medea presented as a specialist, a professional "wise woman".¹⁰ And to remember – Greeks didn't associate healing childlessness with witchcraft.

After the encounter with Aegeus a drastic change occurs in Medea's plans – Medea declares that she is going to murder her children. Apart from cunning she has another weapon – poison. She sends the poisoned gift to the princess. It is not easy to give a clear answer if the use of poison was regarded as an undoubted evidence for sorcery.¹¹ Still, having in mind her past story, Medea's relationship with poisons arises certain associations. We are inclined to propose, that here too Euripides uses his chance to remind the audience of something extraordinary, beyond human essence of this woman. One must not forget also, that the presents are her heritage items, her grandfather being the Sun god Helios himself. But her inhuman essence is mainly revealed in the final episode, when Medea escapes by deus-ex-machina from Corinth. Naturally such an ending is the best argument for the scholars assuming Medea's sorcery and then it doesn't need any explanations; e.g. Page writes, "Because she was a witch, she could escape in a magic chariot".¹² On the other hand Cunningham tries to explain the meaning of this visual image – Medea's disappearance by the magic chariot. In Cunningham's opinion after butchering the children Medea loses her human essence and transfers to the other dimension – becomes a *theos*. But the loss of human nature is her punishment for her deed, some awful and terrible retribution and hence her association with a *theos* should be considered from the negative perspective. Medea was deprived of humane nature and was given merciless, inhuman essence of a *theos* instead.¹³ Though Knox agrees with Cunningham in regarding Medea as a *theos* in this episode, the scholar argues, that even in this case being a *theos* doesn't imply Medea's sorcery. Supernatural winged chariots are hardly an identification mark of witches; they are rather properties of gods in Greek mythology.¹⁴ But Medea is not a god at the end of

¹⁰ Conacher, 1967, 190.

¹¹ For the interesting discussion over this subject see Knox, 1979, 214. The scholar assumes that fifth-century Greek word for "witch" was "pharmakis", though the term "witch" is not adequate translation of it. "Pharmakis" means a woman, who deals with love-charms, drugs and poison. Yes, Medea is a "pharmakis", but it has nothing to do with witchcraft. Besides, there are other "pharmakises" in the Greek literature, e.g. Deianira, Creusa (in *Ion*), who use poison as well, but no one calls them witches.

¹² Euripides, *Medea*, ed. Page D. L., Oxford, Clarendon Press 1938, XXV.

¹³ Cunningham M. P., *Medea ἀπὸ μηχανῆς*, CP, v. 49, №3, 1954, 151-160, 158-160.

¹⁴ Knox, 1979, 212.

the play; she is rather a figure, which personifies something permanent and powerful in the human situation. This strange *theos* bears some resemblance with the force of revenge – dike, but she is more than Lesky's "Dämon der Rache".¹⁵

Kitto argues, that during the whole play there is nothing of the magic background. Even more, the background is at times painfully prosaic. Medea may be the granddaughter of Helios, but still the play deals with an ordinary life. She knows poisons, she is a barbarian princess and thus the audience is less surprised at her miraculous escape. The critics may claim that the chariot is only dramatic convenience, but still it is more than a mere palliation. This visual image of Medea also serves for the interpretation of this character as an embodiment of some irrational force. In Kitto's opinion "The magic chariot is a frightening glimpse of something... the existence in the universe of forces, that we can neither understand nor control – only participate in".¹⁶

In our opinion Kitto's presentation of Medea as an embodiment of irrational force seems too exaggerated. For him this force – *θύμος* is not only one, even the main aspect of this character, it is the whole woman. Medea is a victim of this passion and thus she must be regarded more as a tragic victim, than as a tragic agent.¹⁷ Such a great existence of *θύμος* in her soul is Medea's tragedy indeed, but still it is difficult to accept Kitto's conception completely. Conacher seems to be more precise in claiming, that Medea is rather an individually tragic heroine, engaged in a real agon and making a real choice, than catastrophic figure, doomed by her nature to suffer and to cause disaster.¹⁸ Moreover, we have to take into consideration, that apart from irrational the rational aspects – namely cunning, rhetorical skills, hypocrisy, and certain qualities of mind, ironic treatment – are presented quite well in this character. It is another matter, that the irrational force – *θύμος* is stronger than reason in Medea's personality. Medea acknowledges this completely. In general the irrational is widely connected with nature, with wildness in Greek mentality and Medea too is frequently associated in the play with wildness through the poetic metaphors. Musurillo pays close attention to the poetic metaphors portraying Medea as an untamed animal – lioness with cubs (Med.187), Scylla of Etruria (Med.1343), a Fury, driven by avenging spirits (Med.1260). She swoops down like some bird of prey to wreak havoc on the head of Jason (Med.1231-2).¹⁹ For Musurillo the last scene manifests and

¹⁵ Lesky, 1972, 309.

¹⁶ Kitto H. D. F., Greek Tragedy, Garden City, New York, Doubleday 1954, 209.

¹⁷ Kitto, 1954, 205.

¹⁸ Conacher, 1967, 184.

¹⁹ Musurillo H., Euripides' Medea: A Reconsideration, AJP, v. 87, №1, 1966, 52-74, 66-9.

accomplishes the bestial violence of Medea, hence it is not unmotivated or irrelevant, and it offers a fitting exit for a woman, whose vast passions recall the demons and the Furies.²⁰

Another aspect of Medea's nature, which also prevented scholars to consider the Euripidean heroine as a figure relevant to the problems of the Athenian society, is Medea's foreign origin. The most eloquent supporter of this case, D.L. Page in his introduction of "Medea" argued for the importance of interpreting Medea as a barbarian. "Though her emotions are natural to all women of all times in her position, their expression and the dreadful end to which they lead are everywhere affected by her foreign origin".²¹ According to Page, Euripides' Medea was exactly the kind of a woman, as Greeks would have expected a barbarian woman to be. Her unrestrained excess in lamentation, readiness to tawn upon an authority, the powers of magic, childish surprise at falsehoods and broken promises – were the features ascribed by Greeks to barbarians, argued Page. The scholar presented the Greek sources, in which the above-mentioned traits characterized oriental people.

But to assume, that Euripides strongly accentuated the barbarian nature of Medea and therefore entirely excluded her from the social problems of Athenian women, this argument is not enough. The coincidence of Medea's features with the certain traits of oriental people described in Greek sources is not the right evidence to argue for Medea's presentation in the play mainly as a barbarian.²² Medea is a foreigner by her origin, it is a fact, but what mainly matters for our case is the question as how far her foreign origin prevents her from being regarded as a figure relevant to the problems of the Athenian society.

Medea mentions her origin in her programmatic speech with the Corinthian women. While discussing women's lot in Greece, Aeetes' daughter uses the first person plural forms. She considers herself among them, shares common problems with them, suffers in a same way. Only after listing women problems, does she start to speak about her special case: "But ah, thy story is not one with mine! / Thine is this city, thine a father's home, / Thine bliss of life and fellowship of friends; / But I, lone, cityless, and outraged thus/ of him who kidnapped me from foreign shores, / Mother nor brother have I, kinsman none, / For port of refuge from calamity" (Med. 252-58). It is difficult to be a foreigner in general. But her case is not only difficult, it is tragic, as she is betrayed by the last close person she had and is

²⁰ Musurillo, 1966, 70.

²¹ Page, 1936, XVIII.

²² See Knox's disagreement with Page's conception (Knox, 1979, 211-12).

left absolutely alone in the foreign country. This is the case that distinguishes Medea's situation from a foreigner's situation in general.

From the reaction of the Corinthian women we can see, that they don't regard her as a person alien to their problems. Medea is speaking as a woman to women and exploits and appeals to their feeling, for sympathy and wins their heart.²³

In the scene of Medea's and Jason's first meeting Medea's foreign origin is mentioned once again. To Medea's accusations, Jason has his answer – he speaks about the reward Medea had got for her service to his aims: "First, then, in Hellas dwell'st thou in the stead/ Of land barbaric, knowest justice, learnest/ to live by law without respect of force; / And all the Greeks have heard thy wisdom's fame. / Renown is thine; but if on earth's far bourn/ Thou dwellest yet, thou hadst not lived in story" (Med. 536-540). Here we come across the famous opposition Greek: Barbaric. On the one hand there is the superiority of law (Greece) and on the other hand – the use of force (barbarian land). To live in Greece is a gift, reward for a barbarian. Among barbarians wisdom does not mean anything, while in Greece it is a high honour. If we connect Jason with Greece and Medea with barbarians, the following binary opposition can be drawn: Medea: wild (barbarian) x Jason: culture (Greece). Though it is interesting to notice, that in the whole context of their meeting, this opposition belongs already to the past. Medea is of course a barbarian by origin, but at present she is already well acquainted with Greek civilization. The wifely obedience characteristic of Greek wives is expected from her as well. It is difficult to conclude from this scene (if one is not biased), that Jason regards Medea here as an alien to Greek problems.

The scene, in which Medea's barbarian nature is really accentuated, is the final episode, the scene, when Jason finds his sons butchered by their mother herself. Outraged Jason cries in despair, that only now has he realized whom had he taken from the barbarian land. He had married the woman, the traitor of her father and the motherland, the murderer of her brother. She is a tigress, not a woman, harboring a fiercer nature than Tyrrhenian Scylla (Med. 1342-43), shouts Jason. It is only now, that he puts a demarcation line between barbarian Medea and a Greek woman. "There is no Greek woman, which has dared this", exclaims Jason (Med. 1339). Murder of children is the only trait mentioned in the play as a trait of Medea's barbarism.

While discussing Medea's foreign origin, Knox pays special attention to Corinthian women's – ordinary Greek women's reaction on Medea's terrible deed. Yes, they cry out in protest, when Medea tells them, that she is going to

²³ Knox, 1979, 219.

kill her sons, but it is only the murder of the children, that appalls them. And when after the offstage murder of the children they sing their antistrophe, far from suggesting, that she is a witch and an oriental barbarian, they find another murderer of children in their own, Greek tradition – Ino (Med. 1282 ff.).²⁴

On the basis of our analysis we may attempt to assume, that so-called "magic aspects" as well as the barbarian origin of Medea, mentioned in Euripides' play time and again did not present the heroine as a sorceress and a barbarian woman having no relevance to the problems of the Athenian society. They suited Euripides' purpose to display the deepest aspects of his heroine. The first one – Medea's sorcery of the tradition served for him to present Medea as an impersonification of a tremendous irrational force, to portray "inhuman essence" existed in this woman and the second one – the foreign origin was a material for him to accentuate the exceptional, different nature of this heroine.

²⁴ Knox, 1979, 218.