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### THE MOTIVE OF AMAZONS IN THE CLASSICAL GREEK DRAMA

The motive of Amazons regarded by E. Frenzel as one of the popular motives in the world literature<sup>1</sup> originates from the ancient Greek Literature. The reason for the popularity of the motive can be traced not only in the patterns of the unusual lifestyle of Amazons<sup>2</sup> but also in the fact that the very essence of Amazonic values should in itself worry the patriarchal community of the time. The idea of the motive can be briefly formulated as follows: It is a reflection of woman's aspiration to attain freedom from male domination which is realized not only in the achievement of equality with him but also in *excelling* him almost in all the spheres of life which are traditionally recognized as his prerogative.

The representation of this motive is tangible and interesting in the classical Greek drama, which, I admit, shows regular conformity to certain rules.

It has long been noted that in the classical Greek drama, both in tragedy and comedy, woman, oddly enough, plays quite an active role that suggests a certain dissonance between the woman protagonist's freedom of action in the play on one hand and the limited status of woman in the real life of the time on the other<sup>3</sup>.

The advancement and the activation of woman's role to such an extent in the genre involves traits of the life of Amazons of various degrees of intensity<sup>4</sup>.

In fact, nine tragedies and three comedies out of those survived to the present reader from the classical Greek dramas reveal the motive of Amazons with considerable relevance<sup>5</sup>.

The pattern of realization of the motive, or the so-called action program is positively homogeneous: man being provided with negative function is opposed to woman; eventually male hero is neutralized usually either by murdering him or by depriving him of the force by means of which he could have realized his negative function: In spite of the said homogeneity of the pattern its realization is related to the variety of forms and expressions. To begin with, tragedy and comedy differ from each other in the artistic manifestation of the pattern so that the very fact of neutralization of the negative function in the tragedy arouses pity and fear and in the comedy it provokes laughter.

In most tragedies the members of the opposition are wife and husband. The reason of conflict between the opposed members can be different but the wife's action is basically motivated by the stimulus of taking vengeance upon the husband. Supposedly, this opposition within the dramas of the tragic genre should have been broadly realized in *The Sons of Aegyptus*<sup>6</sup>, Aeschylus' tragedy, which has been lost, in which forty-nine revengeful wives murder their forty-nine husbands on the wedding-night by which the Danaïds neutralize the act of violence committed by the Aegyptus' sons against them in taking their hands by force.

In "Agamemnon", the tragedy of the same author, the opposition, *husband/wife*, is sustained by the act of sacrifice of the innocent Iphigenia offered by Agamemnon, by adultery against his wife, and by Clytemenstra's wish to remain the virtual ruler of Mycenae (1420-1405). However, because of the man-

<sup>1</sup> About the mentioned motive in the world literature see E. Frenzel, *Motive de Weltliteratur*, Stuttgart, 1980, 11-27.

<sup>2</sup> About the myth of the Amazons see Der Kleine Pauly, *Lexicon der Antike*, 5Bde, Verlag, 1979, 575 ff.

<sup>3</sup> For the women position in the classical Greece comp. Pomeroy S.B., *Frauenleben Altertum*, Stuttgart, 1985, 45-66.

<sup>4</sup> Obviously, this motive must have been fully developed in the dramas dealing with the Amazons and about the Lemnian Women and if the plays survived they would provide the complete picture.

<sup>5</sup> The tragedians wrote some drama about amazonic-type of persons, though it's very difficult to prove something about them because they do not represent the theme. We are better informed about Aeschylus' dramas which is related to the theme of Lemnian women and belong to the Argonautic circle of the tragedies such as *The Lemnian Women* and *Hypsipyle* from the tetralogy: *Argo*, *Lemnioni*, *Hypsipyle*, *Kabeiori*. cf. H. Mette, *Der verlorene Aischylos*, Akademie-Verlag, Berlin, 1963, 130-1. The same motive could be found in Aeschylus' tragedy, about which we'll speak in detail below. About the connection of these tragedies with the theme of Amazons see also E. Frenzel, *Motive der Weltliteratur*, Stuttgart, 1980, 12.

<sup>6</sup> For the reconstruction of drama cf. H.J.Mette, *Der verlorene Aischylos*, Akademie. Verlag, Berlin, 1963, 130-1.

ner of action developing in the play the opposition *husband/wife* can only be dimly suspected on the illusory level till it becomes evident from the certain point in the tragedy.

The neutralization of Agamemnon, or the execution of the act of wreaking vengeance upon him, is set in motion only after Clytemenstra's complete possession of the power to control the flow of events under her dictates, ordering the husband to perform the ritual of meeting according to her own plan. I think that this very fact of possessing power by woman speaks that she is suitable to the function of the ruler.

After taking vengeance upon Agamemnon Clytemenstra readily reveals her lust for power, which did not seem so important before that. Her words to Aegisthus are: "I and thou will be musters of this house and order it aright" (16 72-3)<sup>7</sup>.

In *Medea*, Euripides' tragedy, the same opposition *husband/wife* is presented with the new aspect. Here the main reason for conflict is adultery and related to it humiliation and mistreating of dignity. The act of vengeance is carried out through the number of phases. It starts with Medea's analysis of the lack of woman's rights and the inequality with man. Her famous words demonstrates her attitudes: "Surely, of creatures, that have life and wit, we women are of all unhappiest, who, first, must buy, as buys the highest bidder, a husband-nay, we do but win for our lives a master. Deeper depth of wrong is this. Here too is dire risk-will the lord we gain be evil or good? Divorce? - 'tis informy to us: we may not even reject a suitor" (228-33).

And here to it is according to the plan drawn out by woman by which the neutralization of the member of opposition is taking place. Jason remains physically intact, he is not murdered but he is devastated morally. Overwhelmed by the grief he says: "O Zeus, dost thou hear it, how spurned I am? What outrage I suffer of yonder abhorred child murderess, yonder tigress-dam?.. would God I had gotten them never, this day to behond them destroyed of there!" (1405-14)<sup>8</sup>.

In some tragedies the opposition *husband/wife* is substituted by the *man/woman* antagonists in which the former is provided with the function of violence and unlawfulness. Like in the previous cases the pattern maintains its basic principle of a revenge seeking woman. To this respect Euripides' *Hecuba* presents an example of particular importance forming the opposition Polymestor/Hecuba. As different from the other examples Hecuba acts with the group of women which marks the higher degree of Amazonness. Women neutralize not only Polymestor but also his young son. It is remarkable in the play that Hecuba sees the likeness of her plan with that of the Danaïds and of the Lemnian women. To the response of Agamemnon's question "How? - women gain the master over the man?" Hecuba says: "Mighty are numbers - joined with craft, resistless... Did not woman slay Aegyptus' sons, and wholly of her males dispeople Lemnons?" (882-7)<sup>9</sup>.

This model of the opposition is partially realized in Euripides' tragedy *Heraclides* where Euristheus/Alkmene present the opposed members. True, the direct executor of vengeance is Hercule, but it is Alkmene who had made her decision to murder Euristheus. To her mind "For all the sufferings, he did to us, not one, but thousand death is not enough" (960)<sup>10</sup>.

The tragedies with protagonist Electra with the strong concern to take vengeance show specific ways of realization of the Amazonic motive. These tragedies are Aeschylus' *The Libation-Bearers*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra*. In this case the members of opposition are presented with sets of pairs: Aegisthus-Clytemenstra, on the one hand, and Orestes-Electra on the other hand. Pairs are related with functions: husband-wife and brother-sister manifesting members of binary oppositions.

In Aeschylus', *Sophocles'* and Euripides' tragedies under discussion Electra's role undergoes certain gradations: In Aeschylus' *Electra* the motive of exacting vengeance becomes prominent but it is Orestes who performs the very act of revenge. No sooner the act of murdering begins than Electra disappears from the scene<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Clytemenstra is a real androgyne in the phrase: "It a woman thinks like a man she rules with expect hurt" (10-11) cf. P. Walcot, *Greek Drama in its Theatrical and Social Context*, University of Wales Press, 1976, 73. About the importance of motive of vengeance in Clytemenstra's motivation of her action cf. J. Latacz, *Einführung in die griechische Tragodie*, Vandenhoeck, Ruprecht in Göttingen, 1993, 105.

<sup>8</sup> For the interpretation of Euripides' "Medea" cf. also: J. Latacz, *Einführung in die griechische Tragodie*, Vandenhoeck, Ruprecht in Göttingen, 1993, 105; A. Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*, Göttingen, 1972, 68-9.

<sup>9</sup> For the interpretation of Euripides' "Hecuba" cf. J. Latacz, the named work, p. 81-4; A. Lesky, the named work, p. 105-7.

<sup>10</sup> Of course, in this case the motive of Amazons is revealed more faintly.

<sup>11</sup> For the development of the Electra's image from Aeschylus to Euripides cf. L. McClure, *Spoken like a Women*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1999, 199 ff.

In Sophocles' tragedy *Electra's* participation in vengeance seeking expands to the greater degrees. Moreover, in case of her brother's disengagement from the events she is ready to carry out the act of vengeance. The false information about the death of her brother makes her say the words: "Unaided then and by myself I'll do it, for done it must be, though I work alone" (1019-20)<sup>12</sup>.

In Euripides' *Electra* *Electra's* role is conspicuously of the leader's. In this case not only the plan devised by the woman is used to neutralize the antagonist but also *Electra* herself is the active participant of the event. She instigates her brother to the action and does not take pity on her mother at the end of her life, blaming her with words: "Who wished not Agamemnon home from Troy yet reason fair thou hadst to be true wife: Not meaner than Aegisthus was thy lord, whom Hellas chose to lead her war-array" (1077-82)<sup>13</sup>.

*Antigone*, Sophocles' tragedy, offers one more different variant of the opposition man/woman. Here Creon's negative function is expressed in the fact of his being a tyrant, and his positive function is manifested in his determination to fight against tyranny at the expense of his life. Accordingly, the opposition takes the following expression: *man/woman-fighter against tyranny*. In spite of the fact that *Antigone* did not immediately performed the act of overthrowing the tyranny and murdering the tyrant, however, it was her exploits that came into conflict with the tyrant's decisions that caused his complete elimination and made him say: "Come, Fate, a friend at need, come with all speed... and speed my end! Away, away! Let me not look upon another day!" (1328-33)<sup>14</sup>.

Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia at Aulis* shows this opposition *man/woman* in a very extraordinary way. The opposition is made up on one side of the Achaian army - demanding the sacrifice of *Iphigenia* and on the other - *Agamemnon's* daughter herself.

*Iphigenia's* Amazonic nature is realized not in the neutralization of the male opponent but in the decisiveness and firmness of her resolutions and self-sacrifice that is traditionally expected from the male hero. *Iphigenia* is the first person who decides to make self-sacrifice<sup>15</sup> to gain victory in Trojan war just in the same way that is done by male warriors in the battle-field. Her words permeated with patriotic spirits explaining her motivation to make such determination and to overcome her weakness can serve a good example to whatever the courageous man: "For a light unto Hellas thou fost eredst " me, and I die - O freely I die for thee! I come to give to Hellas safely victory-crowd" (1472-3).

Thus, it can be admitted that the tragedies discussed here contain the charge of the motive of the Amazons in the images of protagonist women such as: *Medea*, *Electra*, *Clytemnestra*, *Antigone*, *Iphigenia*... the assumption of which, I think, is absolutely logical. The motive of Amazons is related to the chief conflict of the tragedy and the denouement is marked by either the death of protagonist and victory of her ideas or by the neutralization of the man opposed to her. Thus, in all these cases main conflicts of the tragedies is based on the motive of Amazons<sup>16</sup>.

Far more striking picture of the motive of Amazons is given in comedy, namely, in Aristophanes' dramas as: *The Thesmophoriazusae*, *The Lysistrata* and *The Ecclesiazusae*<sup>17</sup>. In this case the degree of Amazonic motive is intensified by the fact that the female member of the opposition is represented not with one person, but with a group of women, a collective. It is these groups of women who advance the thesis for the comedies, which is subsequently followed by complete or partial realization of the said thesis.

As for the other side of the opposition it is represented with different variants. It can be expressed either with one man, or a group, or with the political system created by men, and adjusted to men.

In the comedy *The Thesmophoriazusae* the opposition *man/women* is given in the confrontation of hostile women against one man, namely, against Euripides who is responsible for the disrespect of women and insulting their dignity. Their assessment of Euripides' conducts and manners is expressed in the following words: "This market-gardener's son pours out against us. I don't believe that there's a single fault he's not accused us of; I don't believe that there is he, calling us double-dealers, false, faithless, tippling, mischief-making gossips, a rotten set, a misery to men" (386-95). The mutual agreement be-

<sup>12</sup> For the interpretation of the *Electra's* image in Sophocles' tragedy *Electra* cf. Ch. Segal, *Sophocles' Tragic World*, Cambridge, London, 1998, 119 ff.

<sup>13</sup> For the interpretation of the image of Euripides' *Electra* cf. also A. Lesky, *Die tragische Dichtung der Hellenen*, Göttingen, 1972, 117-8; J. Latacz, *Einführung in die griechische Tragödie*, Vandenhoeck, Ruprechtim Göttingen, 1993, 258 ff.

<sup>14</sup> About the opposition Creon/*Antigone* cf. also E. Frenzel, *Stoffe der Weltliteratur*, Stuttgart, 1976, 661.

<sup>15</sup> About Euripides' interests of selflessness cf. R. sacrificing young women is in Euripides' tragedies *Hecuba* (*Polixena*) and *Heraclides* (*Macaria*), but in both cases the women sacrifice themselves only in the aim of escaping unworthy life.

<sup>16</sup> R. Gordeziani, *ibid.* 167-74.

<sup>17</sup> In these three comedies the motive of Amazons is stated by E. Frenzel, *Motive der Weltliteratur*, Stuttgart, 1980, 12-3.

tween the women and Euripides, worked out at the end of the comedy means, in essence the victory of women. According to the agreement Euripides gives up writing such tragedies which might cause the humiliation of woman. In return the women spare his life<sup>18</sup>.

Undoubtedly, *Lysistrata* serves the best and brilliant example of the manifestation of the Amazonic motive. The members of the opposition are practically all the men of Greece who are obsessed with a vehement idea to wage the war, and the women of the whole Greece with the demand to end up the war. The women have their distinguished leader. The aim is not the neutralization of men but the neutralization of one of the functions of the adult male, namely, the function of conducting the war. Achieving this goal signifies factual capitulation of men to women. Aristophanes underlines himself the similarity between his women characters and Amazons. The men distressed by the decision of the women will say: "They'll turn their first attention, haply, to equestrian fights, if they do, I know the issue, there's an end of all the knights. Well a woman sticks on horseback. Look around you, see behold, where... fight the Amazons of old. Shall we these willful women, o my brothers, do, the same?" (676-86)<sup>19</sup>.

The expression of the motive of Amazons reaches its peak in Aristophanes' comedy *The Ecclesiazusae*. Here the women oppose not only to one man or the group of man, but also to the unfair political system and formation created by men, in which women are practically disregarded. In this case the victory of women will lead to the promulgation of gyneocracy<sup>20</sup>.

As the present short discussion of the question has shown the motive of Amazons is realized in the classical Greek drama, both in tragedy and comedy. However, it is obvious that comedy presents the motive more conspicuously and with more variations than tragedy. The reasons of difference in the degree of usage of the motive, I think, should be sought in the difference of principles applied for the presentation of reality in tragedy and comedy, respectively. It is impossible that tragedy overpass boundary of expressing reality beyond which woman's role in the society would only acquire fantastical, untrue-to-fact nature. This can be associated with the risk of transforming the tragic image into the comic one. Just for the reason of this threat the motive of Amazon is observable in the tragedy only within the due limits. Considering the admissible freedom of woman's activity in the society, supported by ample parallels in the mythological tradition of the people.

As for comedy its basic purpose is to overpass these limits in order to produce comic effects and, consequently, overpassing the limits and unlashng fantasy creates incredibly vast scope for the realization of the motive.

As it was observed in the present paper Aristophanes' comedies make good example of the certain gradation of the motive of Amazons beginning with the negotiating of agreement between men and women ending up with the establishment of gyneocracy.

<sup>18</sup> For the interpretation of Aristophanes' *The Thesmophoriazusae* consider also Dover K.J., *Aristophanic Comedy*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984, 150 ff. About the Festival of Thesmophoria see H.W. Parke, *Festivals of the Athenians*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1986, 58-72.

<sup>19</sup> For Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*'s interpretation cf. A. M. Bowie, *Aristophanes, Myth, Ritual and Comedy*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 178 ff.

<sup>20</sup> For the interpretation Aristophanes' *The Ecclesiazusae* cf. K. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy*, University of California Press, 190 ff; A. V. Bowie, *Aristophanes*, 254 ff.