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**MEDEA IN WORLD
ARTISTIC CULTURE**

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კლასიკური ფილოლოგიის, ბიზანტინისტიკისა და ნეოგრეცისტიკის ინსტიტუტი



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MEDEA IN WORLD
ARTISTIC CULTURE

Edited by

Irine Darchia, Levan Gordeziani, Lika Gordeziani

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MEDEA ON THE MODERN GEORGIAN STAGE

The fact that Medea is one of the most popular characters in world artistic culture has been recognized many times. Our conference today is proof of this.

Artists throughout the world in various epochs have been enchanted by various aspects of Medea – some are interested in a homicidal mother, others in a vengeful wife, still others are intrigued by a traitor to the homeland, someone foreign, barbarian or even by the first feminist woman.

Yet there exists a nation that looks at Medea from a completely different viewpoint. Together with the aforementioned characteristics, her ethnic affiliation is the most important (I would say even sensitive) thing to them, which can be said without exaggeration, is the defining thing in the reception process of Medea's image in the creative culture of this nation. Even more, Medea frequently changes places from creative culture to reality in this country and becomes a subject of societal discussion – she is examined beyond the texts not as the character of some work, but as a real person. Accordingly, her image is not examined within a philological aspect, but within a moral, ethical one.¹ And because representatives of this nation base an ethnic identity upon Medea and consider her to be a representative of their own ethnos, they are constantly defending themselves and Medea despite whichever layer she is examined in –

¹ A monument was erected to Medea in Batumi, Georgia on August 2009. The public response was very acute. One part of the public protested in every possible way: through essays in newspapers, television speeches, demonstrations – as they believed that a filicidal person does not deserve a monument. They were opposed by the half of the public, who did not find Medea a murderer. At any lecture and in any program devoted to the ancient theme, the following question will inevitably come up: Did Medea really kill her children? On one occasion, when a professor of antiquity was invited as a guest to a radio program specially devoted to the controversial problem of the Batumi monument, one listener called to the studio saying that Greeks were to apologize for such an appalling humiliation of Medea. 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.

a creative one or in reality. The nation in which the name Medea is one of the most frequent, cannot come to terms with the idea that the Colchian woman had killed her own children. In any case, this is the way it has been up until the most recent times.

This trend has its own history and it starts with Akaki Tsereteli's drama *Media* (1875).² Tsereteli gave an example of using this theme to Georgian artists, which almost became canonical in Georgian reality: a complete rehabilitation of Medea and her "emancipation" from the sins committed.

All subsequent authors were guided by this scheme itself and despite the genre, the main, directing line was always the same – Medea had not killed her children. Today I will not speak of the works of these authors, much has been written concerning this. It is enough to just glance at the material from our previous conference "Argonautica in World Culture" (2007) or see the site made by colleagues from our institute classical-tradition.tsu.ge. I will only focus on the versions shown on the Georgian stage.

One of the most popular (dramatic) interpretation of Medea belongs to a Georgian writer Levan Sanikidze. In his drama "Colchian Daughter" he presented Medea as the best wife, an extremely caring mother, and a deeply philhellenic person, whose help to the Greek people was not limited to the medical sphere. However, the ungrateful Greeks treated her in an appalling way: they murdered her children and intended to kill her as well. And the main reason here was that Medea was not Greek, she was barbarian. Unlike all ancient traditional stories, Sanikidze's play ends with a suicide – Medea sets her house and garden on fire and is engulfed 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 theatres in 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). If we bear in mind that the Euripidean *Medea* was staged in Georgia only once (by Chkhartishvili) and had encountered many difficulties – as it became possible only after some serious psychological prepa-

² He wrote a play called *Media* (Me + Dia meaning I + a female, woman), which was originally intended to be a trilogy: *Media in Colchis*, *Media in Hellas*, and *Media Back in The Homeland*. However, the initial idea failed to be implemented and the poet published only its first part called *Media* in 1875. 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. On the other hand, he intended to create a certain exposition for a better presentation of Medea and in order to prepare the reader for the changes (in the mythic plot as well as in Medea's image) forthcoming in the remaining part of the trilogy. We may reckon that the second play was supposed to allude to 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.

ration by 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, Sanikidze's *Medea* owes its outstanding popularity in Georgia to this very fact rather than to its dramatic value.

After a prolonged break, the play *Medea* has yet again reappeared on the Georgian stage in 2001 (*Medea*, Euripides, Anouilh, 2001, Free Theatre). The director Gocha Kapanadze was quite young at that time. Although the director must have been aware not only of the Euripidean tragedy, but also of the 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. In 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, the play also carried same pathos. We learn from the chorus that the Corinthians not only killed Medea's children, but had also bribed Euripides in order to "rescue the image of the Hellenes" and blame Medea for all of it!

In the final monologue, Medea tears up the books (evidently, Euripides) blaming Euripides that he defamed her just only for 5 golds and tells that she never slaughtered her children. It could be a logical ending to the prologue but for one point: in the play Medea kills her children herself and even provides an explanation for her behaviour – she did it because she did not want them to be slaughtered by the enemy. This very aspect – the discrepancy between Medea's deeds and her appreciations – may be considered as the director's original findings and even proves innovative concerning the interpretation of Medea's image. However, the aforementioned 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 exonerate his heroine.

In 2010, a famous Georgian composer and director, Vakhtang Machavariani presented a concert setting of Aleksis Machavariani's opera *Medea* at the Tbilisi Music Centre, with Vakhtang being the librettist himself.³ The first act takes place in Colchis, with the second taking place in Corinth ten years later. An entire philological opus is offered by the deeply intellectual director in the concert program brochure, where he not only resorts to antique sources for help (Euripides, Pindar, Aristotle, Seneca), but also literature from subsequent periods – beginning from the Middle Ages to the present (beginning with Franz Grillparzer and ending with Christa Wolf, Dario Fo, and even Ludmila Ulitskaya).⁴ Vakhtang Machavariani's position is clearly seen from this

³ The opera was written in 1988.

⁴ See the program of the performance.

research – he wants to justify Medea. Yet it is interesting that he restrains himself from a traditional Georgian finale – "Medea does not kill the children" – in the libretto. In Machavariani's version, Medea informs Jason in the last duet that she has killed the children, because in the opposing circumstances they "would die at the hands of the enemy". After this however, Machavariani directs the finale befitting of an opera – Medea and Jason kill themselves. On one hand, such a finale is possibly dictated by a traditional finale characteristic of an opera genre – many protagonist couples die in opera,⁵ on the other hand however by an attempt for such a serious story to have a "logical" conclusion. A woman who kills her children naturally must kill herself and a man whose wife killed his children must be unable to withstand such a hardship, killing himself as well.

A young director, Maka Natsvlishvili makes a setting of Neil LaBute's play *Medea Redux* for Ardi Fest in 2010.⁶ In the play, a teenage girl is impregnated by a teacher who deserts her. The girl gives birth to a child and a few years later when she meets the child's father, and when a fatherly instinct at long last awakens within him, she kills the child. Maka follows the text exactly and does not try to change anything. Here we can only discuss the choice of the play – was the Georgian director's choice determined by ethnic affiliation or not? Yet this will be examined in more detail below.

2015 was a very productive year for Euripides – two Georgian directors make a setting of his tragedy – Mikheil (Misha) Charkviani at the Music and Drama Theatre (*Medea*, Euripides) and Salome Joglidze at the Sokhumi Theatre (*Me, Medea* – according to Euripides and Ovid).

Both performances are quite different from each other – if the first one follows Euripides' text exactly (Charkviani), the second one is basically built around Medea's monologue (Joglidze). But both directors are unambiguously devoted to Euripides' finale and break with Georgian tradition – Medea kills her children in their plays. The second issue is by what route the directors take the character to this decision.

For example, Charkviani tries to weigh Medea's situation down. Apart from the hardship that Euripides brings upon Medea, Charkviani adds yet one more – Creon rapes her. What was the reason for introducing this scene? The lack of the arguments as to why Medea is so unforgivable and he tries to turn her from a victim of psychological and moral pressure to a victim of physical pressure, was it? Then this better facilitates an explanation of Medea's behaviour... Because as a rule, a victim of vio-

⁵ Othello and Desdemona, Romeo and Juliet, Aida and Radames, Amelia and Ricardo, Luisa and Ferdinand, Tristan and Izolda, The Flying Dutchman and Senta, "The Power of Fate".

⁶ The play received two festival prizes, one for best directing and one for best actress (Nata Kakhidze).

lence becomes a violent individual themselves.⁷ Apart from this, a television is turned on almost throughout the entire show, where it is seen how Jason entertains himself with Glauce, which is apparently viewed by Medea as well.

It is true that Charkviani does not try to justify Medea as per Georgian tradition, but by introducing these features, it's as if he wants to show that Medea is forced to make such a serious decision in unbearable conditions.

Salome Joglidze's scene of Medea's filicide is interesting – it seems as if Medea kills her children "in herself", "inside her". As I already noted, Joglidze's show has been set entirely around Medea's monologue, yet the moment most emphasized is that Medea kills her children in order to deliver them from dying at the hands of the enemy. Clearly, this is already with Euripides, but it is precisely this moment from the entire monologue that is stressed most of all: "It has no difference, they will be unable to escape from death anywhere".

The play *Anti-Medea*, authored by Lasha Bugadze, represents Medea's tragedy in a completely new context – this is a story which could happen in our time, or more precisely, in the possible reality of our epoch where isolationism, a fear towards something strange and different becomes a norm and where walls are built (literally and figuratively) to protect "civilization" from "the barbarians".⁸ *Anti-Medea* is a dystopian play telling us the story of a woman exiled from an isolated and frightened Europe. Yet along with this, Medea is also a victim of her own populism here – she tries to publicize her story on social networks and from the "likes" received there, thinks that her virtual "friends" are bothered by her fate. Yet reality turns out to be completely different and her virtual "supporters" very soon disappear when the woman needs their support in reality. In response to this – and to probably focus more attention on it – the disillusioned Medea murders her children live on the air, in every case, she officially declares this. The play's finale is open.

As a conclusion, can we say that modern Georgian theatre broke a centuries-long tradition which freed a Georgian woman from murdering her children or not? At a glance, yes. Did the audience receive this kind of stance towards Medea's myth on the part of the directors or not? If we have the reaction of the audience and the success of the performances in view, the answer is positive even here.

Did the attitude change that Medea is interesting to Georgian authors basically due to her ethnic affiliation or not? An unambiguous no.

⁷ It's interesting that if Charkviani tries to weigh Medea's situation down, Lars von Trier in his "Medea", on the contrary, introduces two additional episodes – a poisoned crown belonging to Glauce sacrifices an innocent animal and Medea gets her eldest child to help in the process of hanging her youngest child.

⁸ The play is not published yet.

The short interviews I recorded with the directors provided me the means for saying this.

With a median age of 35 years, the authors substantially distance themselves from their predecessors and are completely free from ethnic complexes. It is true that their stance towards Medea's character is heterogeneous, but not in any case is it determined by the character's ethnic origins. It can be said that modern Georgian theater and art in general has drawn closer to a European model of this type of reception as never before. The mighty trend extant in Georgian reality has abruptly lost colour – examining it as a real story of the myth and likewise, as a real historic hero of a mythological character.

P.S. Yet nothing can be stated for sure – I had finished the article when I came across an interview on YouTube of the actress who played the role of Misha Charkviani's *Medea*. After a successful premier, the actress said in a television interview: "I am really happy that over the course of my creative [career] I have had the lot of playing this wonderful Georgian woman, this truly wonderful Georgian woman..."