

## REDIRECTING THEMATIC PERSPECTIVES: EURIPIDES' VERSION OF THE MEDEA MYTH AS THE RISE OF A LITERARY MYTH

*Abstract: Our intention in this study is neither to define myth nor to create an interpretative typology; rather, it is to find a link between myth and literature by establishing a trace in the formation of a myth which is very old and dynamic. Our focus is on the story of Medea and its multiple versions, particularly on the way in which different literary accounts, which centre on the character of Medea, have led to the construction of a very complex and contradictory myth in Euripides' play Medea. Before Euripides, Medea is not regarded as an entirely fearsome sorceress, a monster obsessed with revenge, her children dying of other causes, but Euripides creates a new literary myth based on other existing versions. The main purpose of our study is the examination of the artistic means and procedures used by the ancient playwright Euripides to represent, in literary terms, the character of an ancient myth, Medea, as a literary archetype reproduced in various ancient texts. A special emphasis is on the manner in which the fundamental situation of the story of Medea has been subject to essential thematic changes which have led to the coining of what we know nowadays as the Medea myth.*

**Key words:** *Medea, Euripides, Myth, Archetype, Tragedy.*

### 1. Introduction

The relationship between myth and literature has always been difficult to define, as it has been constantly hard or almost impossible to provide exact definitions of these two ways of expression when conceived separately. If literature is the verbalized expression of the creative imagination, or “verbal artistic activity” (Ducrot, Schaffer 134), then the most accessible definition of myth would contain the fact that the myth “tells a sacred story; it reports an event which took place in primeval times, the fabulous times of ‘the beginning’” and serves as “a model for human behaviour” (Eliade 5-6). Myth is thus a narrative, a story loaded with symbols; likewise, the narrative or the intention to tell or communicate something represents an essential element of literary discourse, too. One possible way of establishing a link between myth and literature is to compare them in the light of the function each has in their shared hypostasis of narrative:

literary narratives give a partial psychological analysis of the hero, whereas mythical narratives reveal something mysterious and ineffable; the meaning of a literary narrative is more or less obvious; whereas that of a mythical narrative is hidden and requires exegesis; and, lastly, in contrast to the literary narrative, the mythical narrative often has an initiatory and transcendent character (Bilen 861).

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One could also add that the literary narrative, for example in a novel, is fiction and a product of imagination, whereas the narrative of the myth requires that it is accepted as true (for Leenhardt, Mauss, Eliade and Sellier). A poem cannot be translated, whereas the narrative of a myth can be translated in any language, as for Levi-Strauss. Literary texts are structured in an arbitrary way, whereas the narrative of myth represents a series of symbols which can be reduced to a permanent structure, as for Levi-Strauss, or represents a semiologic system, as for Barthes, for whom actually all texts are semiologic systems. The literary narrative refers to a historical moment, whereas the narrative of the myth presupposes a temporal form which is reversible and represents an aspect of sacred time, as for Eliade. The literary narrative expresses reason and individualism, whereas the narrative of myth expresses the supernatural and collectivity (for Sellier and Levi-Strauss). The literary narrative tends to a dialectical resolution of the conflict, whereas for Eliade the narrative of myth offers initiation within an altered situation. The literary narrative is personalized, whereas the narrative of myth takes effect in the social sphere, as for Sellier. The literary narrative represents a relative form of truth, whereas the narrative of myth discloses eternal and absolute truths, which are fundamental stories, as for Eliade.

## **2. The Issue of Literarized Myth and Literary Myth**

In the studies on the reappearance of myth in literature, numerous mentions were made of the manner in which the ancient myths “renew themselves as they are transmitted from one literary version to another”, representing “the paradox of permanence and transformation” (Kushner 300). The most recurring issue for the critic, the historian, the theoretician of literature, and others who study different aspects of the imagination, is that of the flexibility of myths, and especially the capacity of ancient myths to live and regenerate ever new meanings for artists, writers, readers or spectators of the succeeding periods. The most persistent question in this case concerns the source of the power of revival of myths. One attempt to answer it is that “the permanence of myths as they manifest themselves in modern literature lies not in fixity of narrative detail, nor in an ontological unity of the human mind as enshrined in the world of myths, nor again in the preservation of a classical flavour, but in the very dynamics of myth itself” (Kushner 300).

Much has been discussed about the fact that we only know myths through literature. Far from arguing this issue, we also accept that literature is the proper storehouse of myths. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that myth survives to the present “completely swathed in literature and is already literary, whether we like it or not” (Brunel xii). The difficulty appears when one attempts to define the concept of literary myth in relation to the myth itself. A very pertinent remark on this concern has been made by Philippe Sellier who, in an article published in *Literature* in 1984, makes the distinction between the ethno-religious myth and the literary myth. He starts by defining the ethno-religious myth as a foundational, anonymous and collective story that continues to exist in the present and is admitted as true; the logic of the story is that of the world of imagination, and on closer inspection it exposes some serious structural oppositions. Then, he indicates that in the process of passage from myth to literary myth, the ethno-religious myth preserves the “saturation with symbols”, its “compact” organization and also its metaphysical aspect, but loses its initiatory, foundational characteristic, it is no longer veridical and anonymous, since works that include it are generally signed. In his article, Philippe Sellier also explains that literary myth does not simply represent the preservation of ethno-religious myth in literature. Literature itself has the potentiality to create myths on its own, to mention some recent literary myths that Western literature has produced in modern times, such as the myth of Tristan and Isolde, the myth of Faust or that of Don Juan. In the case of these situation-

stories one has the impression that myths emerge from literature, and that in their process of creation the imagination of the writer plays an essential role. Of course, one should admit that in the structure of these literary myths some recognizable mythical elements definitely exist, such as Medea's love philtre, the pact with the Devil or the stone statue.

Starting from the differentiation of literary myth from the ethno-religious myth provided by Philippe Sellier, we have taken the liberty of developing our own terminological borders for the Medea myth. We believe it to be a literary myth for two reasons: (1) the myth of Medea originates in an already established ethno-religious myth, focusing on the life experience which is symbolic and representative of the human condition, this myth being literarized in Antiquity; but especially because (2) the character of Medea becomes an archetype, which "exerts a fascination (whether idealistic or repulsive)" (Dabiezies 961) in a community, offering it the explanation for an existential situation, and finds its artistic expression in the ancient and modern literary discourse.

The myth of the Aeolids has references to the myth of Jason and Medea, the myth of the Argonauts and the myth of the Golden Fleece, and focuses in its narrative on the curse of the Aeolids, Jason's search for the Golden Fleece, Medea's contribution to the acquisition of the Golden Fleece and also the consequences which follow its acquisition, including the episode of Jason abandoning Medea for the sake of Glauke. We consider the myth of the Aeolids to be an *ethno-religious myth* that consists of several mythical sequences and represents a collective, anonymous, religious story which *passes to literature*, preserving its symbolic and representative value, and thus becoming a *literarized myth*. Such a literarized myth is seen through the lens of the times in a comprehensive and exemplary way in relation to human condition, and is expressed fragmentarily in various authorial texts. We should mention here Eumelus' *Corinthian History* (8<sup>th</sup> century BC), where the epic poet depicts Medea's sovereignty over Corinth, the discord which appeared between Jason and his wife, and the death of their children as a consequence of the unsuccessful attempt to make them immortal. In his *Theogony* (V, 992-1002), Hesiod presents Medea and Jason's voyage from Colchis, their arrival in Iolcus and the birth of their son Medus. Pindar, in the famous fourth *Pythian Ode*, portrays Medea as endowed with the gift of prophecy, as a foreigner experienced in the use of herbs; she is Jason's lover who plays an important role in the quest for the Golden Fleece, being carried from Colchis to Iolcus by Jason, where she eventually kills king Pelias. The fragments of the above mentioned ethno-religious myth pass to literature, becoming a *literarized myth* and revealing the transition from sacred to profane. The phenomenon is the narrativization of the myths in which the myth becomes a text that, in its turn, enters the domain of aesthetics.

Unlike the myth of Aeolids, we view Medea's story as a *literary myth*, a narration-product of the imagination of a specific author, a symbolic situation with metaphysical features which *emerges and exists in literature*, is expressed as a literary text in the form of tragedy as a dramatic work varying from one period to another, from one cultural milieu to another. It is the case of certain literary masterpieces capable of producing literary myths, to name just Don Juan, Doctor Faustus, Don Quixote, Lancelot, whose texts become "a sacred language, establishing and redeeming the primordial reality that creates the specific myth", and thus emerging as original representations of new situations that are typical for the human condition as an expression of the profaned sacredness (Durand 167).

The Medea myth originates in the literarized myths of Antiquity, but is consolidated as a fully-fledged literary myth due to Euripides, who has inherited the mythic images but transformed them into a texture of new concepts. The creative perception of this author means in reality *changing* the primary scheme of the myth by focusing on Medea and transforming it

“through losses, through mythemes originating in other myths, etc.” (Durand 303), and *creating* an original symbolic situation as a new literary and mythological tradition, which proves the complicity of literature in the process of myth formation.

### **3. Medea in Mythical Sequences Prior to Euripides**

In Euripides' times, before his play appeared on the stage, Medea was known as a princess, daughter of Aietes, the king of Colchis, and the nymph Iduia. She is the granddaughter of Helios, the sun-god, and she is also the niece of the nymph Circe, Aietes' sister and vaguely related to the goddess Hecate. In Greek mythology, the trio Medea, Circe and Hecate represent the most notorious sorceresses.

The fearful witch Medea appears in five distinct mythical sequences produced most probably in different historical periods of Ancient Greece. The first mythical episode engages Medea in the quest for the Golden Fleece which belongs to her father and is kept in a sacred grove. Bewitched by Aphrodite, Medea uses her magic power to help Jason of the Aeolids, the leader of the Argonauts, to carry out Aietes' impossible tasks. She creates a magic salve to protect him from the fire-breathing-bulls, teaches him to throw the stone of Discord in the middle of the giants in the field of Ares; she also gives him a herb, which eventually makes the dragon, the guardian of the Golden Fleece, fall asleep. In the course of the Argonauts' flight from Medea's furious father, she helps Jason to kill her only brother Absyrtos and then scatters the pieces of his dismembered body on an island in order to delay her father's pursuit. According to some versions, Medea and Jason stopped on her aunt Circe's island so that she could be purified after the murder of her brother, relieving her of blame for the deed.

The second mythical occurrence is set in Iolcus in Thessaly, Jason's homeland, where he and Medea go to deliver the fleece to Pelias. In one earlier version of this mythical sequence, Medea and Jason live on amiable terms with his uncle Pelias. Here Medea is presented as helpful, rejuvenating Aeson (Jason's father) and the Hyades (nurses of Dionysos). A different version of the myth features Pelias as the murderer of Jason's parents and as the usurper of the Iolcus throne. In order to avenge the death of Jason's parents, Medea convinces Pelias daughters to cut him up into pieces and then boil them in a cauldron, assuring them that he would thus be restored to youth. After the atrocious death of Pelias, his son, Acastos, banishes Jason and Medea, the couple taking refuge in Corinth, where the third major mythical episode is set. This is the best-known event in the myth and represents a fusion of divergent traditions. Medea, worshiped as a deity by the Corinthians for having saved the city from famine, is associated with the cult of the goddess Hera. As a reward for having disdained Zeus, Hera promises Medea to make her rival's sons immortal. During the sacred ceremony, the children, whom Medea has buried in the floor of the temple for the sake of rejuvenation, die. Another version of the myth presents the Corinthians as responsible for the death of Medea's children who are murdered in the temple. The death of the children offers the opportunity to represent Medea as a lonely woman, abandoned by Jason, and as a foreigner banished from the city, since Jason intends to marry Glauke, the daughter of the ruler of Corinth, Creon. The sorceress, in her desire to take revenge, sends a poisoned dressing gown to her rival, causing her death. In the myth, the death of Medea's children at the hands of the Corinthians is illustrated as a consequence of Medea's vindictive act, but the people of Corinth ascribe the murder to Medea.

In the fourth sequence of the myth, Medea heals Hercules' madness and, after being cleansed of her past crimes, she finds protection at the court of Aegeus, King of Athens, who does not only offer her shelter but also marries her. After Theseus' return from Troezen, Medea attempts to poison him, or, as in another version, she orders him to confront the bull of Marathon.

The last sequence of the myth reveals Medea leaving Athens and moving either to Ephyra or to Colchis, where she comes back with a son by Jason, Aegeus. Later, Medea restores the kingdom of Colchis to her father, and together with her son Medus conquers anew the lands formerly belonging to the kingdom of Colchis and establishes a new kingdom named Media.

In our view, the various mythological traditions about Medea represent a pre-text for the Medea myth, since, in general, “the myth is a ‘pre-text’ to literature, a prior text generated, in the case of ancient myths, by the oral tradition (an ‘ethno-text’, as specialists say). It is a story that ‘penetrates’ into literature” (Pageaux 128). From the fragments which have survived from Antiquity, one could observe that the Greek tragic dramatists used the myth as a pre-text when they developed in their works different aspects of Medea myth. Aeschylus, in his play *Nurses*, presents Medea while reviving the Hyades, which were sacrificed to save Athens in the time of war. In the play *Women of Colchis*, Sophocles dwells on the role played by Medea as a sorceress, giving Jason the magic unguent in order to become invulnerable by sword or fire and for one day. This play also recounts the episode when Medea, in the course of her flight with Jason from the fury of her father, kills her brother Absyrtus. *Root-cutters* (or *Pelias*), another lost play by Sophocles, depicts the death of Pelias, Jason’s uncle, following the gathering of herbs for his rejuvenation. It is only in one of Euripides’ lost tragedies, *The Peliades*, that the dramatist portrays Medea as an evil and cunning sorceress who charms Pelias’ daughters with her words and persuades them to cut into pieces and boil their father, pretending a ritual of rejuvenation. In this play, Euripides depicts Medea as someone capable of using a combination of magic and persuasive speech to destroy the king through his own daughters, thus establishing a pattern for a latter situation when Jason will be crushed by his own sons.

#### **4. Euripides’ Contribution to the Formation of Medea Myth as a Literary Myth**

But it is in Euripides’ other tragedy, entitled *Medea*, that the Medea myth receives its full literary expression through changed thematic perspectives which lead to the rise of a new literary myth. First produced in 431 BC, this play follows the myth of Jason and Medea, but presents the latter as an evil protagonist who, after being betrayed by Jason for another woman, takes revenge against her husband by killing her children.

As we could see, the earlier versions of the Medea myth, as well as its different accounts explored by other artists in their texts, represent a blueprint, an inherited story, which holds control over the imaginary concerning the development of the main situation or action.

The exploitation of the Medea myth by Euripides comes in a period in which mythological traditions are multiple and often conflicting. Although some elements of familiar stories are more widespread than others, there are no canonical versions of the traditional tales. The surprising number and degree of variations in even the best-known myths show that they are not fixed entities and as such they cannot possess one single determinate meaning. Certainly, myths are significantly related to the sacred rituals existent in ancient Greece, but this is not their only function. Even though a story emerges in a particular religious ritual or mythological context, it may undoubtedly have some other purposes as well, and it should definitely develop over time to meet the changing cultural conditions, depending on the domination, censorship, morals or ideologies of a certain period and milieu. Therefore, some earlier neglected aspects of a story could be revived or a widespread form of that story could be transformed, leading to the discovery of some new, earlier unexplored aspects and meanings. The dramatists of the period “had considerable latitude in altering the myths to suit their own purposes” (Blondell 47), and thus way providing the foundational and fascinating situation of a new myth.

Euripides' artistic imagination interacts with oral tradition in the re-production, transformation and formation of the literary myth. The Medea myth, originating in the ethno-religious myth, arose and consolidated as a literary tradition in the dramatic form of tragedy, followed its own process of development in the realm of literary imagination, developing as a literary myth with a dynamic but also typologized narrative characteristic of a community, but also individual in essence since its significance is determined by the fate, psychic landmarks, emotional states and the action of a heroine.

Euripides borrows the mythic situation of Medea from the oral tradition and also from the existent literary tradition. At the same time, the dramatist transforms the mythical situation, changing the content of the consolidated myth through a diversification and innovation of the theme, idea, representation of characters, values and theories. Consequently, by the use of his creative freedom, Euripides transforms Medea not just into a deceitful sorceress capable of murder, but he also makes Medea the murderer of her own children, killing them purposefully, in a vindictive act to punish Jason's betrayal. Relying on her bloody past, Euripides makes credible a crime which goes against both human and divine laws, a crime that could not be predicted by the poet's audience. Although he creates a shocking situation, Euripides ensures the unity and coherence of the myth due to the thematic reverberation of Medea's supposed cruelty. In other words, the Medea myth, when reflected in literature, and especially in Euripides' works, shows a transition from mythological images to conceptual thinking, the development of concepts and abstractization repressing the specific nature of mythical thought, where *mimesis* shifts, within the artistic consciousness, from an imitation of reality within reality to "imitation of reality in imagination, that is, an illusory reflection of real phenomena" (Freidenberg 43).

The accomplishment of these two processes marks the emergence and consolidation of the literary myth of Medea in the dramatic text, which regulates itself by trying to preserve the structural elements and create a coherent and normative – but also dynamic – literary system, "which evolves depending on certain requirements, on particular inner parameters" (Pageaux 129), but which is in continuous transformation also due to the varying visions and distinct creative personalities of the ancient and modern writers who have focused on rendering this myth.

The ethno-religious myth tends to be static, providing a typologized concept of existence within a community which thus becomes identified and particularized. However, in ancient drama, the elements and

the all-encompassing images [of the ethno-religious myth] begin to take on a new, dramatic and dynamic character; human freedom is involved, and we are no longer immersed in the myth but are offered free choice (or more or less free) between different forms of adherence to extremely heterogeneous mythical complexes (Dabiez 964).

On the day of the first performance of Euripides' *Medea*, the audience most probably could not predict such a cruel outcome of this mythical situation. Although Euripides frequently shocks his spectators by radically transforming some well-known mythical stories and characters, they still expect to see the wondrous, magical and glorious marriage of two inimitable heroes – Jason, the leader of the Argonauts, and Medea, his unique and astounding wife – entering the divorce trial. Although Medea's history is not excellent, there are also favourable stories about her, given that, like most miraculous figures, she is ambiguous in the use of her powers. In some mythical stories, she has a positive role, participating actively in the foundation of some cities. In other references, Medea saves Corinth from a famine. Her magical powers help Aegeus to

produce descendants. Also, she cures Hercules' madness. In the stories prior to Euripides, she rejuvenates Jason's father and the Hyades.

It is important to mention that in the stories preceding Euripides' play, Medea attempts to make her children immortal. Thus, the knowledge spectators have about Medea would not lead them to expect seeing Medea in terms of the infanticide carried out by a 'barbarous' mother. Of course, Euripides relies heavily on the audience's knowledge of other mythical stories involving infanticide, especially when these stories are closely connected to Jason and thus the connection is made immediately. Everyone knew the stories about the descendants of Aeolus, Jason's great-grandfather, who originally ruled in Thessaly. One of Aeolus's sons, Athamas, had two wives. The first, Nephele, gave birth to a son, Prieus, and a daughter, Helle. His second wife, Ino, tried to kill Prieus. In their attempt to escape from the wicked step-mother's murderous attempts, Prieus and his sister Helle fled towards the East on the back of a golden ram. Another story of the same house of Aeolus alludes to maternal infanticide. Tyro, the daughter of Salmoneus, bore Poseidon twin sons, Pelias and Neleus, which she exposed in the wilderness to die. There they were found and rescued by passing herdsmen who raised them as their own. Pelias later usurped the throne of Jason's father, Aeson, in Iolcus, and send Jason on what he hoped to be a fatal quest for the Golden Fleece. Another murderous event in the Aeolid family refers to Aeolus and his children Canace and Macareus. Canace, having committed incest with her brother Macareus, was encouraged by her father to commit suicide. Moreover, Aeolus ordered to expose the child born out of this incestuous union.

Jason's affiliation to the House of Aeolus – as the great grand-son of Aeolus, great-nephew of Sisyphus, Tyro's grandson – should be relevant here, since he belongs to a family with a rich infanticide tradition. Euripides, however, does not make this family connection explicit. Instead, he chooses to depict Medea as the only and the most horrible maternal infanticide. Although Euripides' chorus alludes to Ino's example of maternal infanticide, he makes sure that neither Ino nor Tyro, Procne or any other female infanticides in Greek mythology can be comparable to Medea's act, since she kills her children purposefully out of revenge for Jason's betrayal.

The element of sorcery contributes much to the establishment of the negative image of Medea. The sorceress – the preserver of the Golden Fleece (which symbolizes agricultural prosperity, royal power and fertility) - is connected with the dragon, suggesting the infernal powers which Medea controls secretly. When "compared with Jason, who is seeking to establish royal ascendancy and introduce a reign of order, Medea is the image of chaos and the forces of evil" (Mimoso-Ruiz 770). The mythical events based on Medea's practice of sorcery revealed Medea as an evil witch, guilty of the deaths of Pelias, Creon and his daughter Glauke. The episodes of boiling the ram and Pelias as a magic ritual give an insight into Medea's successful or unsuccessful capacity to transform one from old to young and from alive to dead.

Euripides relies on this negative and mysterious aspect of Medea, especially when the oral tradition has already produced the story where Medea failed in her attempt to immortalize her children. From this magnanimous failure to the maternal infanticide there is only one small step and Euripides carefully builds suspense toward this shocking climax. The parallels and oppositions to the above mentioned myths, which form the structure of the myth, are incorporated into these closely linked motifs of witchcraft and infanticide, creating a plausible murder which breaks all human and divine laws and provides the unity and coherence of this newly emerging literary myth of Medea.

#### **4. Conclusion**

From the day of Euripides' performance, Medea has never appeared as an ordinary character. The writers following Euripides invariably portrayed Medea as the infanticide, skilful in using the magic herbs, driven by a great desire for vengeance. The artistic imagination of the succeeding centuries continued to present Medea's infanticide as a paroxysm of violence which transformed her into a monster craving for destruction and revenge, a perverse adventuress, a barbarian who refuses the civilization of the city, a villain and a woman horrifying to men.

The literary myth of Medea, which emerges and establishes itself as a tradition in Euripides play, exerts such a great fascination that the literature of later periods has never stopped looking at it as a source of inspiration, whether in an idealistic or in a repulsive manner, re-evaluating some earlier neglected aspects of the story, transforming it, and thus leading to the discovery of some new, previously unexplored aspects and meanings.

The impact of the mythical pattern established by Euripides' text is so great that in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it led to a real challenge: to justify Medea's crime and to draw out sympathy for her plight. The task of rehabilitating Medea becomes extremely difficult since her story involves the taboo of child murder. But most probably, unless another more powerful myth of Medea appears, where from the dreadful and dangerous image she is presented as the source of strength, the situation will not change. Till then, Medea remains a villain, a monster, but an intriguing and fascinating one, offering possibilities for powerful representations in theatre.

We assume that the Medea myth represents a complex and dynamic literary system, but also a unified literary tradition and typology as thematic matter and structural expression both in the form of literary myth and literarized myth. Therefore, we think it appropriate to use both terms – *literary myth* and *literarized myth* (literarization of myth) – with reference to the myth of Medea, which is in line with the literarized myths of Ulysses, Prometheus or Orpheus, as well as with the literary myths of Don Juan, Doctor Faustus or Don Quixote.

The typology and dynamics of the Medea myth offer a well-defined but also original and efficient object of study, since the comparative study of myths, along with comparative drama, represents a relatively recent innovation in the scientific study of world and comparative literature, with the goal of "bringing into light replays and variations, as well as durables, presences in some eras and absences in others – in the work of certain writers – presences that maintain alive the ancient myths as well as some eclipses and prodigious adaptations" (Pageaux 127).

A myth is not an individual's personal issue but a collective, communal concern. In the process of literary creation the myth has an essential role in the relationship between the writers and their audience, since the writers reveal their experience or ideas through symbolic images, which may echo a myth that is already present in the contemporary literary repertory or a myth that could be revived because it may express the essential features of the writer's period.

As Pierre Albouy has rightly mentioned, the rise of a literary myth is impossible without a "palingenesis" that would bring it back to life, but its rebirth or re-creation should take place in a period when the symbolical references of that myth best reveal the stringent problems of a community. Moreover, "no literary myth arises unless there is a regeneration that conjures the myth back to life at a given period, demonstrating its capacity to express pertinently the problems of that age" (Brunel xiii).

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