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The Italian Medeas of Corrado Alvaro and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Transformation of a Myth in Twentieth-century Italy

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> "Tragedy is still a pattern of order and an attempt to give meaning to something, to a life or to a series of lives." (W.G. Sebald in L.S. Schwartz, *The emergence of memory*)

MODERN VARIATIONS ON AN ANCIENT MYTH

Euripides' version of the myth of Medea is one of the most controversial and iconic texts among the corpus of ancient Greek tragedies that has reached us. In literary tradition the figure of Medea occupies a prominent position among Greek tragic characters and still now this myth enjoys an extraordinary vitality in figurative art, cinema and literature.[1]

The *Nachleben* of Euripides's *Medea* is also rich with remarkable re-appraisals, some more faithful to the model than others. In particular, modern versions foreground those threads of the narrative fabric of Euripides' tragedy liable to make the text a vehicle for discussion on current concerns. Modern authors have reconsidered the myth from a number of binary oppositions embedded in the tragedy, such as the clash between Greeks (rationality) and barbarians (irrationality), archaism and modernity, colonialism and underdeveloped countries, male authority and feminism, memory of past and alienation of the present. By reading the myth through the lens of these oppositions, Medea has often been seen as a symbol of the clash of cultures and the revenge of the weaker person, be it those sexually marginalised or politically oppressed (in relation to this interpretation one may recall the 'Irish' Medea of Brendan Kennelly).[2] Medea is "the exploited 'other' who fights back".[3]

Medea, mother and lover, who resorted to the crime of infanticide to punish the betrayal of Jason, has inspired painters, writers and musicians throughout the ages. In particular, ingenious and provocative theatrical adaptations flourished during the second half of the last century.[4] In the last thirty years, other Medeas, as symbols of ethnic minorities abused and discriminated, have come into being in theatres all over the world: a Medea set by Alberto Gonzalez Vergel among the Incas of the sixteenth century (1973); within a Brazilian city of the twentieth century (Chico Buarque and Paulo Pontes, *Gota d'agua*, 1975)[5]; in Communist Budapest (Arpàd Göncz, 1976); a Galician Medea set during the Spanish civil war (Manuel Lourenzo, *Medea dos fuxidos*, 1983); the Medea of Toni Morrison (*Beloved*, 1987) situated amongst the black slaves of America; the version of Leo Katunarić set in former Yugoslavia (*Medeja*, 1995); or, the Medea of Ripstein whose story unfolds in Mexico City (2001).[6]

In all of these re-readings, the story of Medea is not just portrayed from the point of view of a betrayed and abandoned woman. The myth of Medea and the Argonauts is essentially seen as a fertile 'open text' in which it is possible to extrapolate and further explore a number of themes more or less *in nuce* in the text of Euripides' version, such as the clash of different cultures, the decline of morality or the desire for justice.

It is my intention to explore how the hypotext of Euripides' *Medea* has been transformed in twentieth-century Italy by Alvaro and Pasolini. Corrado Alvaro's *La Lunga notte di Medea* (1949) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Le Visioni della Medea* (1970) appeared during two different and equally pivotal moments in the history of contemporary Italy: mass emigration and rural exodus that began immediately after the end of World War II and the economic growth of the 50s and 60s. These two readings reveal some examples of the process that Genette calls "opération transformative"[7] in which the plot of Euripides' *Medea* is re-deployed. In these two hypertexts the transformation of the literary model follows two distinctive paths: Alvaro presents the deracinated Medea as an emblem of the alienation, discrimination and persecution of ethnic minorities in a hostile host-culture.[8] Pasolini, by contrast, seeks to

preserve the archaic aura of the myth which he utilises as a paradigmatic tale of the incompatibility between values and norms of life of ancient cultures and the cynical pragmatism of modern societies.[9] By quoting portions of Euripides' text, the version of Pasolini is also an attempt to keep alive the memory of our classical heritage which he sees as endangered by modern apathy. Unlike Alvaro, in Pasolini's *Visioni della Medea* the *fabula* of Euripides's tragedy is 'augmented' through mythical tableaux extraneous to the source text. These sections derive either from Pasolini's acquaintance with the myth of Medea preserved in several pre-Euripidean versions (e.g. the initial scenes of the primitive Colchis) or from his own imagination (especially, but not exclusively, the scenes concerned with the presence of the centaur Chiron).

Both interpretations were positively welcomed in Italy by their respective publics. *La Lunga notte di Medea* was successfully received both by critics[10] and public during its first shows at the Teatro Nuovo in Milan (July 1949, scenery by Giorgio De Chirico) and Rome (March 1950), and until 1981 (with a new adaptation prepared by Werner Schroeter) frequently staged in several Italian theatres. The shift of focus from vengeance, reason and passion to the themes of isolation, vulnerability and maternal *pietas* harks back to the main tenet of Alvaro's literary production: the marginalisation of the proletariat in modern societies. Pasolini's Medea, by contrast, was poorly received by public and film critics alike who judged both the film and its author's cinematic language as indecipherable and ambiguous. Only in the last two decades the visionary prophetic stance and the poetic power of *Le Visioni della Medea* have been rediscovered and appreciated. The re-reading of the myth of Medea presented by Pasolini transcends the cultural barriers of Euripides' Athens and imbues the myth with the theme, at the heart of Pasolini's poetics, of endangered regional cultures and historical peculiarities posited by the post-industrial consumer society. Since the years of their release, both *Edipo Re* and *Medea* fuelled the debate on Pasolini's political and anthropological interpretation of Greek tragedy and his denunciation of 'the end of history' in the context of post-modernism. Pasolini was one of the first intellectuals in post-war Italy to articulate the implications of the eclipse of local cultures engulfed by mindless consumerism and irreversible conformity.

MEDEA: THE NIGHT OF REASON

> Nuit: tout état qui suscite chez le sujet la métaphore de l'obscurité (affective, intellective, existentielle) dans laquelle il se débat ou s'apaise
> (R. Barthes, *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*)

In *La lunga notte di Medea* Alvaro revisits the eponymous tragedy of Euripides setting the story in an unidentified place at dusk. Here the mytheme of night, ancient symbol of irrationality and the mind's darkness, acts as an illustration of the *état d'âme* of Medea's sorrow, a foreigner in a hostile land. Alvaro's text carefully re-presents Medea's gradual descent into the horror of infanticide, deprived as she is of any succour or hope in the future (hope that Euripides gives to his Medea through the promise of hospitality offered by Aegeus). This dramatic κατάβασις is already foretold in the very first scenes of the play when Medea through a mirror – symbol of memory but also an ancient instrument of magic[11] – sees future events. The reading of the myth through the lens of memory is indeed the main interpretative key suggested by Alvaro himself who, in a note to the text initially appearing in the weekly magazine "Il Mondo" in 1950, argued that his Medea "is the ancestor of many women who have suffered racial persecution, and of many others who, rejected by their own fatherland, wander without identity to eventually end their lives in concentration or refugee camps".[12] The version of Alvaro stages the clash between two different worlds: on one side, the mysterious and primitive world of Medea's Colchis; on the other side, the civilised and progressed society of the Greek Corinth where Jason opts to settle.

Le Visioni della Medea, one of the most faithful versions of Euripides's *Medea*, is the result of Pasolini's engagement with Greek tragedy.[13] Pasolini posits the plot of Euripides's *Medea* in a complex structure in which he amalgamates literary quotations from his source text with a number of variations and additions which complicate the familiar *fabula* of the hypotext, such as, for instance, the presence of the centaur Chiron, pedagogue of Jason, probably a

reminiscence of Pasolini's readings of other ancient pre-Euripidian versions of the myth of Medea.[14] The paradox in the version of Pasolini is that it is a mythical character, the centaur Chiron (according to Pasolini, symbol of archaic wisdom),[15] who, in one of the 'mythical' excursuses, teaches Jason how to "rationalise and desecrate" reality. Indeed, the scenes containing excursuses extraneous to the text of Euripides are the main interpretative keys of Pasolini's Medea. These sections play also the structural role of introducing the two meetings of Jason and Medea, the first in Colchis and the second in Corinth.

Both Pasolini and Alvaro draw selectively upon Euripides' hypertext as well as reflecting the reasoning of Medea's final solution in Euripides' text. Alvaro sees in the myth the emblematic marginalisation and persecution of those who are considered different; Pasolini reintroduces the pre-Euripidean threads of the myth and reads the myth as a paradigm of the clash of cultures.

Alvaro's re-reading of the tragedy sets off with a 'bourgeois' prologue, more attuned to comedy as, thanks to the busy gossiping of chambermaids, the audience finds out that Medea is a foreign sorceress who is waiting for the return of her husband, Jason, from his visit to the palace of Creon, king of Corinth. This prologue is functional to the construction of the character of Medea, isolated and ill-fated heroine amid the events of a normal daily life.

From the initial lines, the theme of love appears to be the predominant motif together with the anxiety of exile and sorrow for the lost fatherland. Alvaro ably sketches Medea as a faithful wife who, for love, has chosen a modest life. Unfortunately, the deracinated Medea has not succeeded in building a new life more attuned to Greek norms. Traces of her Colchian 'barbaric' upbringing are still plentiful in her new abode (several magical potions are stored in her house). Even though Medea has married a Greek, she still remains, according to her chambermaids, one of "those barbarians who bring with themselves their horrific practices" (Act I scene 8).

In Pasolini, the representation of the story unfolding in the 'primitive' Colchis is mainly conveyed through images devoid of any speech.[16] In this 'visual' prologue the spoken scenes are mainly those centred on Jason's upbringing, another form of structuring the system of binary oppositions in which Jason represents the reasoning of the civilised world, whilst Medea embodies the instinctive imagination of primitive societies.

In the first mythical *excursus*, the centaur Chiron tells Jason his genealogy. Here, Chiron is not only the pedagogue of the child Jason but also, on a second level of reading, the projection of our ancestors who, in a far distant and primitive world, were used to interpret nature as a form of theophany. This is, *in nuce*, the meaning of the words uttered by the 'mythical' centaur to Jason (p. 92):

> Tutto è santo, tutto è santo, tutto è santo. Non c'è niente di naturale nella natura, ragazzo mio, tientelo bene in mente. Quando la natura ti sembrerà naturale, tutto sarà finito. [...] In ogni punto in cui i tuoi occhi guardano, è nascosto un Dio!
>
> All is sacred, all is sacred, all is sacred. Nothing in nature is natural, my child; remember this. When nature seems to you natural, all will be over […] In every direction you look, there is a god hidden!

This initial *pars construens* of Jason's education taught by the semi-human centaur is replaced in the second part of the film by a *pars destruens* in which a human Chiron teaches the grown up Jason how to rationalise and desecrate ("sconsacrare") those aspects which in the 'primitive' age of his childhood he had recognised as sacred. Thus, the metaphor of human evolution from the mythical to the rational age is fully accomplished (p. 94):

> Ciò che tu vedi nei cereali, - afferma Chirone - ciò che intendi dal rinascere dei semi è per te senza significato ... infatti non c'è nessun dio.

> Whatever you see in the crops, says Chiron, whatever you understand from the regeneration of seeds bears no meaning for you…indeed there is no god.

Jason, symbol of modern humankind, progressively learns how to erase any mythical presence from the elements of nature surrounding him. Such fulfilment of the evolving parable of progress is even evidenced in the surrounding environment: the lakeside setting of a nature unspoilt at the time of Jason's childhood is replaced by the noisy workshops of modern and 'rational' Corinth. The above quotation is not the only example of the *pars destruens* of Chiron, as he will have many other occasions to impart a rationalising thought. During the construction of the ship Argo, Chiron replies sarcastically to Jason (who is asking the centaur to call upon the gods and perform a propitiatory rite) that only reason and human will count since Jason's goal now is to seek to attain material wealth and power.

HYPOCRISY

In Euripides, the meeting between Medea and Creon is anticipated in the dialogue between Medea and the chorus in which Medea seeks the help of the Corinthian women in the name of female solidarity. Her words aim to recall that she is not only a foreigner, far from her homeland,[17] betrayed by her husband whom she trusted and loved,[18] but, and above all, that she is the exemplification of the pitiful female condition.[19] By means of this speech, Medea succeeds in obtaining the support of the chorus which, consequently, will not reveal her homicidal plans.

Alvaro's version conveniently edits out the interjection between Medea and the chorus (here the Corinthian women participate in the play only as off-stage voices hostile to Medea) and gives more space to the dialogue between Creon and Medea which is also the final scene of the first act. Creon, symbol of hypocrisy,[20] justifies his decision to send Medea away from his land by claiming that his people are intimidated by those who are foreign and different:

> Il mondo sta diventando troppo grande. (...) E più si aprono le vie del mondo, più la gente si chiude. Più grande la terra, più limitata la gente. [...] Non c'è asilo per i figli di Medea nel mio regno. Non saprei difenderli dall'ira del popolo.
>
> The world is becoming too big. (…) And as a consequence, the easier communication is, the more introverted people are. The bigger the world is, the more provincial the people are. (…) There cannot be asylum in my kingdom for the children of Medea. I would be unable to protect them from the anger of my people.

Whilst Euripides's Creon claims to be concerned for the safety of his daughter,[21] the Creon of Alvaro remains vaguer: "I fear that your presence may cause some kind of catastrophe" (Act I scene 10). Thus, Alvaro 'contaminates' the world of Euripides's *Medea* with the pressing issues of the twentieth century: the hardening of prejudice as a response to the opening of frontiers; the insecurity of citizens sharpened by their cohabitation with foreigners. Indeed, the tragedy of any unauthorised immigrant is well enunciated by Creon in his discourse on the idea of citizenship and of belonging to a specific community:

> Giasone è rientrato nel nostro ordine. È un greco. Torna alla sua patria e nella sua famiglia umana.
>
> Jason has returned to our order. He is a Greek. He returns to his homeland and to his human family.

Hypocrisy is also the main characteristic of Pasolini's Creon. In scene 66 (the first interplay between Euripides' and Pasolini's Medea), the king of Corinth orders Medea to leave the city. His decision is not based on racial prejudice but in order to alleviate the guilt felt by his daughter:

> non per odio contro di te, nè per sospetto per la tua diversità di barbara, ... che ho paura. Ma è per amore di mia figlia: che si sente colpevole verso di te, e, sapendo il tuo dolore, prova un dolore che non dà pace.
>
> It is not for hatred against you, nor for suspicion of your barbarian tendencies …. that I am afraid. But for the love of my daughter: who blames herself for your situation and knowing your pain, she herself feels a pain which knows no peace.

Notwithstanding these words, just as in the text of Alvaro, Pasolini's Creon admits he is afraid of Medea:

> Mi fai paura. [...] E' noto a tutti in questa città, che, come barbara, venuta da una terra straniera, sei molto esperta nei malefici. Sei diversa da tutti noi: perciò non ti vogliamo tra noi.
>
> I fear you. […] It is known to everyone in this city that as a barbarian, from a foreign land, you are very familiar with the black arts. You are different to all of us: that's why we do not want you among us.

Creon resorts, just as in the tragedy of Euripides, to the misogynistic *topos* of women as experts in witchcraft but adds a further motivation, that of extraneousness, which is latent in the corresponding passage of Euripides. Pasolini's Medea intimidates because she embodies values of a more archaic and primitive culture that Creon and the modern Corinth have forgotten, and towards which they now cultivate fear and resentment.

ALIENATION

The myth of Medea is first and foremost a story of abjection, horrific alienation and vengeance. The tragedy of the abandoned woman is interwoven with that of the expatriate, who cannot return to her homeland (following the fratricide, Colchis is closed to Medea forever), and for whom there is no new homeland on the horizon. It is clear that the narrative strategy of Alvaro tends to intensify the unease of Medea so that the audience is led to interpret the future infanticide as inevitable.[22] For this reason, unlike the version of Euripides, Alvaro's Creon denies Medea the reprieve of even one day, forcing her to leave the same night and therefore to rush her decision. Alvaro's construction of the 'innocent' Medea is completed by the fact that she has not yet, at this stage in the story, conceived her infanticidal revenge, unlike Medea in Euripides. Alvaro's Medea is genuinely suppliant in contrast with the Medea of Euripides, who seeks to deceive Creon as to her true feelings in order to obtain a day's reprieve within which to carry out her revenge.[23]

The first act of *La Lunga notte di Medea* ends with Medea alone in the face of her ineluctable destiny, prey to the fear which will grip her soul again at the end of the play when she utters her final words (Act I scene 10):

> Ma io ho paura! Ora sono io che ho paura. Perchè non c'è più nessuno con me se non il destino.
>
> But I'm afraid! Now it is me who is afraid. Because there is no-one with me but destiny.

At the beginning of the second act, Euripides's hypotext surfaces again in the dialogue between Medea and two cloaked women whose presence in the scene recalls the interaction in the text of Euripides between the chorus of Corinthian women and Medea. However, in Euripides the women of the chorus show themselves being sympathetic to Medea's plight when they invite her nurse to bring Medea out of her house.[24] The two women in Alvaro, by contrast, are hostile towards Medea and her sons:

> sono figli di una straniera ... sono abbandonati dal padre. Gli dei per essi non esistono più

> They are sons of a foreigner … abandoned by their father. The gods no longer exist for them

and to demonstrate their utter contempt for foreigners, they abuse the domestic hearth, symbol of the family home, a place which represented for Medea her new *omphalos*.

The clash of cultures and societies is also conveyed in Pasolini through the representation of geographical spaces: Colchis, with its monstrous cliffs and labyrinth-like terraces, contrasts Jason's homeland "flat, melancholy and realistic" (p. 31) from where he, seeking an "enlightened, laic and mundane destiny" (p. 35), departs with his companions towards the unknown. The binary opposition between Colchis and the Greek Corinth does not only underscore a visual and spatial dramatization of two antithetical landscapes (Colchis resembles an African desert, whereas the scenes concerning Corinth are filmed amid the Renaissance architecture of Piazza dei Miracoli in Pisa)[25] but also suggests a second interpretation according to which the western hero Jason, symbol of the industrialized northern Italy, allures Medea, dweller of the rural under-developed south.[26] At any rate, the Argonauts of Pasolini do not evoke in the reader's mind the heroes of the ancient myth but rather a band of predators who, as Pasolini himself notes, "have the attitude of common thugs and rogues, of mercenaries" (p. 37). This portrayal of the Argonauts as anti-heroes (symbol of aggressive colonialism) strengthens the contrast with the figure of Medea, charismatic priestess.

Medea's metamorphosis is then completed when she loses all capacity to 'see' traces of sacredness in nature and replaces lust, her new *omphalos*, with the sacred relationship she previously had with reality. She is aware of the loss of her roots but, nevertheless, is unable to prevent the change, undergoing her sudden conversion *a rebours* in a state of bewilderment.[27]

Unlike the version of Alvaro, Pasolini inserts in his adaptation of the myth of Medea several excerpts, more or less freely quoted from the text of Euripides. Within the structure of the film and its prevalent use of unspoken scenes, those parts containing dialogues acquire a remarkable relevance. On several occasions, Pasolini has emphasised the supremacy of the language of images over the spoken word; he perceived the language of words gradually loosing its poignancy alongside the fading preservation of the knowledge of ancient languages.[28] Why then did Pasolini decide to include in his film excerpts of Euripides' text (and in the earlier stages of preparation of the film he planned to keep the original ancient Greek of Euripides!)? In fact, quotations from Euripides strengthen the interplay between the hypertext and its hypotext;[29] the decision of quoting clusters of lines from Euripides ought to be seen as an exercise of memory, the artist's attempt of rediscovering (or, rather, retrieving?) ancient wisdom in the culturally, and linguistically impoverished reality of post-industrial Italy. This exercise of memory entails another important element of Pasolini's argumentation: the state of collective memory in twentieth-century societies. In Pasolini's view, collective memories are relics of an idealised 'primitive' knowledge, handed over through centuries within rural societies (read the ideal harmony of Colchis before the Argonauts) but which is considered burdensome and irrational in the modern world of mass culture and media (represented in the film by Jason and Corinth). Thus, the desire of Medea to live with Jason and to abandon her world is the metaphor of the longing of 'primitive' (rural) societies towards 'modernity'. If Medea loses her ability to see in the present traces of the sacred and, at the same, learns to deconsecrate nature, similarly rural societies rush headlong to forget their language, traditions and origins. However, the re-discovery (or rescue) of memory can only take place within a small elite, the masses will be unable to reconcile themselves with the memory they have previously violated.[30] It is also for this reason that Medea, after the killing of her children, says to Jason "Nothing more is possible, ever".

Both Alvaro and Pasolini purpose to foreground Medea's perception of fragility. At the end of the first three introductory scenes, Alvaro's first narrative flashback recalls the expositive prologue in the play of Euripides. Its content is a *leitmotiv* which will recur again elsewhere in

the text: Medea remembers her encounter with Jason, the theft of the Golden Fleece, and the murdering of her brother, Apsirthus. Alvaro's Medea, 'cleansed' of any thirst for revenge, has a clearer view of the consequences that Jason's betrayal will bring to her and her sons.[31] From the very outset, Medea is anguished by her vulnerability as a woman in a foreign, and potentially hostile, place:

> ... una donna che si può colpire nei figli, nel marito. E quando si è tagliata come me la via del ritorno, non si può fidare che sul marito.
>
> … a woman who can be hurt through her sons and her husband. When the way home has been severed, as in my case, you can only trust in your husband.

The perception of vulnerability is sharpened by the certainty of future solitude, especially for those who, as she admits, have already met their soul mate; now that she has lost Jason's love, no place is secure anymore and everybody is a potential enemy:

> Si parte finchè si spera di fare quell'incontro che deciderà della nostra vita. [...] Ma io, chi debbo più incontrare? [...] In fondo a ogni strada è quello che tu conosci. C'è il tuo nemico. Soltanto il tuo nemico che ti aspetta.
>
> One sets out hoping to meet the person who will change your life. But who else for me to meet? […] At the end of every road lies what you already know. Your enemy. Only your enemy is waiting for you.

Medea's pessimistic thoughts will all be confirmed by her future meetings with Creon and Aegeus, at the end of the first act and the beginning of the second act respectively.

The ill-fated and passive Medea of Alvaro contrasts with Pasolini's Medea who is more forceful and thoroughly *faber fortunae suae*. Indeed, longing for wealth and power (which at last will prove to be the main cause of alienation), is one of the main tenets in Pasolini's Medea. According to him, this process is not idiosyncratic of Jason's development alone but also affects anyone who seeks to homologate himself to the dominant culture, the mass culture. This second evolutionary typology (which, in Pasolini's view, leads to irremediable and irreversible disaster) is embodied by Medea. It is Pasolini himself who, in an explanatory note to scene 44 on the theft of the Golden Fleece (pp. 45-6), seems to encourage the reader to take this interpretation:

> Medea si muove, osservando intorno tutte le cose che avevano avuto per lei un così grande, profondo, vitale significato. Esse [...] sono cose morte. Disperatamente Medea si aggira tra loro. L'albero? È un vecchio triste albero qualsiasi. Le rocce? Sono erosioni folli delle acque, che aspettano altre acque inanimate. Gli oggetti sacri? Poveri oggetti, lasciati lì, nella penombra, inerti.
>
> Medea walks around, observing all the things which have had a deep and vital significance for her. [Now] these things […] are dead. Desperately, Medea wanders among them. The tree? It is an old sad tree like any other. The rocks? They are foolish erosions made by water which await other godless waters. Sacred objects? Poor objects, left there, in the half-shade, inert.

The theft of the Golden Fleece and the lack of respect for religious icons are the first symptoms of the loss of the 'centre', the *axis mundi* (p. 33), without which the pre-industrial society loses itself. Pasolini sees the Golden Fleece and the Sacred Tree – like any totem in 'primitive' religions – as symbols which delineate the *omphalos*, the centre of divine manifestation. Therefore, the incapability of perceiving the sacred in those symbols causes a loss of identity which is the first step towards adherence to the hypocrisy of the dominant culture.

ABJECTION

In the second act of Alvaro's play, the second instance of direct contact between the hypotext and its hypertext is in the representation of the meeting between Medea and Aegeus, whose arrival in the Euripidian version Aristotle disapproved as illogical and unnecessary.[32] In Euripides, the meeting comes after the first of three dialogues between Medea and Jason when the Greek hero admits that his main aim is to pursue the goal of φιλοδοξία[33] and for this reason he has decided to marry the daughter of the king of Corinth.[34] In the text of Alvaro, Medea and Jason have not yet met, but Medea is forced to find a solution to her situation whilst being harangued by the hostile crowd yelling (Act II sc. 4):

> Al bando la megera! Non vogliamo fattucchiere a Corinto! Basta con la straniera! Via la straniera! Fuori la barbara!
>
> "Ban the vixen! We don't want a sorceress in Corinth! We've had enough of that foreigner! Get out foreigner! Get out you barbarian!"

Euripides writes alluding to current political events (in 431 BC Athens had quarrelled with Corinth over the political influence of the island of Corcyra). It is for this reason that the chorus (vv. 824-45) praises Athens as the holy land of Aphrodite,[35] the *locus amoenus* of artistic excellence and justice.[36] Hence Medea receives the help of the Athenian Aegeus, who promises her hospitality once she had been chased out of Corinth. By contrast, Alvaro's Medea is denied the help of an old friend like Aegeus who hesitates and eventually evades Medea's pleas, his main concern being to avoid a war against Corinth: "Nowadays, any incident may be enough to cause a war" (Act II sc. 4). Thus, the refusal by Aegeus is intended to mitigate the judgment of the audience in relation to Medea's decision to kill her sons. In the context of these events, the infanticide is now presented as a kind of euthanasia which would save Medea's children from the terror of persecution.[37]

In the version of Pasolini, abjection leads inexorably to the extreme act of violence. The distorted significance of a violent act is another pattern through which Pasolini defines the opposition between sacred and desecrated. The fertility rite of the sacrificial dismembering of victims, an essential part of religious life in the ancient world where such sacrifices acquired a "legitimate anthropological grounding",[38] is echoed in the abominable σπαραγμός of Apsirthus, which Medea, fleeing with Jason after the theft of the Golden Fleece, carries out in order to prevent the inhabitants of Colchis from catching and punishing them. In his version, Euripides had not suppressed the mention of the murder of Apsirthus (vv. 166-7) as he wanted to emphasize that Medea had sacrificed everything for Jason. In this way Euripides aimed to gain the audience's sympathy for his heroine. Pasolini, however, offers a sociological reading of the passage: the attraction of the modern world (Jason) contaminates and subverts the values of ancient societies (Medea). Primitive civilisations believe that life can be obtained through the death of a victim (a human sacrifice), although they are also subconsciously attracted to the idea of death. This is the significance of the chanting which haunts the fantasy of the young women of Colchis before the arrival of Jason:

> L'eroe barbaro ma "moderno" che deve venire, si fa sempre più bello e affascinante alla loro immaginazione che le vota alla morte.
>
> The barbarian but "modern" hero who is to come, becomes more and more beautiful and handsome in their imagination which vows them to death.[39]

As in many primitive societies, the inhabitants of Colchis imagine their own end when an impious, handsome but terrible man will arrive by sea. Medea is attracted by the man who arrives by sea; likewise, the Italian working class, peasants during the years of economic growth, rushes headlong to abjure their rural beliefs and archaic religion in order to embrace pragmatism and mundane success. The enterprise of the Argonauts symbolises this search for worldly success.

EPILOGUES: MEDEA(S) AND JASON(S)

Ah, essere diverso – in un mondo che pure
è in colpa – significa non essere innocente
(P.P. Pasolini, *La religione del mio tempo*)

Alvaro's version of the myth reaches its climax in the dialogue between Medea and Jason. This is the only meeting between the two central characters, and although the play is moving towards its end, at this stage Medea does not seem to have yet contemplated the infanticide. Medea genuinely beseeches Jason to leave with her: "Let's flee together" - she says in tears (Act II scene 6). Jason, however, a very modern character, dominated by ambition, rejects Medea's pleas and a future of obscurity:

> Vi sono situazioni in cui diventa un'offesa non comandare e non regnare. Che cosa fa Giasone, il condottiero dell'Argo, in una casuccia isolata ai margini di Corinto?
>
> There are situations within which it is wrong not to command and rule. What is Jason, the captain of the Argo, to do in a humble abode, isolated on the outskirts of Corinth?

Instead, he wants to exploit the fame achieved in his distant youth to ascend the throne:

> Sparire oscuramente? Come due vagabondi? Noi potevamo perire tornando con l'Argo ... Quello sarebbe stato un evento memorabile. [...] Quando uno è stato Giasone, avrebbe dovuto morire in tempo. ... Ed ora il tempo delle grandi imprese è terminato. E Giasone è costretto a piegarsi alla miserabile politica.
>
> Flee in the night? Like two vagabonds? We could have died on our way back on the Argo… That would have been a more memorable event…When one has been Jason, it would have better to die at the time…Now the time for heroic tasks is over. And Jason is forced to bind himself to miserable politics.

Alvaro explores in the most extreme way the φιλοδοξία of Jason: he looks for another 'memorable' event, although his actions are now not those of a hero, but of a cynical social climber who depicts himself as a victim of circumstance ("And Jason is forced to bind himself to miserable politics").[40] In fact, by his conduct, he seals his own fate as a fallen hero who is now only concerned with power and material wealth, as Medea rightly points out to him: "You now become king. I made you a hero." Jason is a prisoner of his own past and of the role of 'hero' imposed by his society; he is, according to Alvaro, "a man who is a victim of his own popularity with regard to his personal relationships".[41] More than his ambition, it is the context of the situation which shapes his choice. Just like in Euripides (or perhaps more so), Alvaro outlines the mediocrity of Jason, his obsequiousness towards those in power, his quest for γάμους βασιλικούς and royal connections:

> Regnerò. Sarò potente. Non sarò più il ricordo di un eroe. Ma un re.
>
> I shall reign. I shall be powerful. I will no longer be just a memory of a hero, but a king.

Jason falls into an unwanted catharsis from his *folie de grandeur*. This is the dénouement which Alvaro adds to Euripides's epilogue: the former hero repents his actions and decides to put an end to his desire for power with anonymity (Act II scene 13):

> Andrò a battere alle porte del mio villaggio. Nessuno mi riconoscerà. Io stesso dimenticherò il mio nome. Purché mi lascino guardare il mio mare, seduto sul lido donde sognai partire.
>
> I will go back to my own village. No-one will recognise me. I myself will forget my own name. Provided that they let me look at my sea, sitting on the shore from where I dreamt of leaving.

An attack on hedonism and greed, deeply rooted in the modern society, can also be understood in Pasolini's scene 79 of Medea which contains an abridged version of lines 446-626 (the first meeting between Medea and Jason) of Euripides' *Medea*. In the hypotext, Jason confirms his desire for φιλοδοξία and εὐδαιμονία. This trait is removed by Pasolini who, by shortening much of Euripides' dialogue, seeks to emphasize the 'laity' of the scene: the gods Aphrodite and Eros, invoked in the hypotext, are not mentioned at all. It is clear from the words of Jason that Eros is understood only as a physical attraction, and not as a manifestation of divine will (Pasolini (1970: 105)):

> Anche se tu non vorrai mai riconoscere che, se hai fatto qualcosa per me, lo hai fatto solo per amore del mio corpo.
>
> Even if you will never realise it, if you have done something for me, you have only done it driven by desire for my body.

Furthermore, Pasolini's Jason (like in Alvaro) abases his passed love for Medea admitting that (Pasolini (1970: 105)):

> Tu mi rimproveri di essere ingrato. Ma io, anche se forse senza molta fatica e magari, lo ammetto, non volendolo, ti ho dato infine molto più di quello che ho ricevuto.
>
> You reproach me for being ungrateful. But I admit it, even perhaps without much effort; unwillingly, I gave you, all in all, much more that I received.

In this scene, the aim of Pasolini is to project into a classical myth an anthropological allegory of the hypocrisy of the western world towards the underdeveloped nations. Two further scenes (72 and 85) recall almost faithfully the first meeting between Medea and Jason. The cinematic version of the meeting is shorter than Pasolini's original script in which there had been sketched Callas reciting in ancient Greek the verses of Euripides with some significant differences: the verses in which Medea mentions her plan to kill her sons would have been removed (βουλεύματα is a key word in Euripides' text used e.g. in vv. 1044, 1048 where the infanticide is still uncertain in Medea's mind, and in 1079, in which the infanticide is finally resolved upon). Instead, Pasolini adds more pathos to his version of the hypotext by inserting the following phrase (Pasolini (1970: 67)):

> andrò via da questo luogo che avrà visto morire, uccisi dalle mie mani consapevoli dell'orrido delitto che compivo, i figli miei che pure tanto ho amato.
>
> I will go away from this place which will see the death of my sons, killed by own hands aware of the horrendous crime I was committing, my sons whom I loved so much.

In Euripides, Medea, after the exit of Aegeus, explains to the women of the chorus her future plan. Pasolini, by contrast, to the dialogue adds a vision of Medea in which a sacrificial rite ends with the dismembering of a victim: Medea collects the scattered members of the victim (an act that recalls and 'redeems' the sacrifice of Apsirthus). In this vision the barbaric landscape of Colchis is enmeshed with the urban space of Corinth in the moment when the "sweet and obedient" (Pasolini (1970: 65)) soil of Colchis, that Medea is digging, turns into the paved floor of her house in Corinth.

CONCLUSION

La Lunga notte di Medea ends with the deaths of Medea's sons and of Creusa who, unlike in Euripides's text, is not killed by Medea's sorcery, but (in a manner which will be echoed in Pasolini's Medea) dies, victim of a fatal accident, by falling from a tower of her palace, mesmerised as she watches the menacing crowd rush towards Medea's house to lynch her sons. Even in this case, the hypotext is overturned: the death of the young and innocent Creusa is not the catalyst which inflames the Corinthian crowd but, instead, an event which

expiates the persecution of Medea and her sons.[42] However, it would be a mistake to talk of divine justice as, in this play, only those who are innocent make amends for the offences committed by others as Creon poignantly laments in the last scene of the play "only those who are innocent die" (Act II scene 13). Medea in her *planctus* sees with incredible clarity the meaning of life: life is a frightening mystery, filled with ineluctable sorrow each time people betray love in the name of power and glory.

Alvaro conceives Medea as a symbol of the desperation of all refugees and exiles of the then recent conflict; their most immediate urgency is to construct a new world centred on the affection of family. Unfortunately, this new habitat, into which Medea has transferred the essential values of her primitive world, crumbles on the first contact with a more complex society, with traumatic effect on her psyche.

Pasolini believes that the modern world, for which Jason stands, is unable to decide; Jason is the antihero who lacks will and determination (which, for example, he needed to save and protect Medea, the children and their *oikos*). By contrast, Medea is fully the hero of ancient tragedies who lives in a situation of necessity and in it she operates by assuming all her responsibilities.

The betrayal of Jason and the ensuing revenge of Medea are presented by Pasolini as a metaphorical *conte* about the absence of any common ground of understanding between past and present, and, therefore, the impossibility of any reconciliation between the pragmatism of modern, industrialised societies and the 'religious' mindset of archaic and rural worlds.

Medea in Alvaro is paradigm of the exclusion and persecution of the 'different' whereas for Pasolini Medea is a symbol of clash between nature and nurture, the opportunism of the bourgeoisie and the integrity of proletarian minds. Hence the two different finales: Alvaro's Medea walks away from Corinth defeated and abandoned facing ahead an erratic life. Pasolini, by contrast, restores Euripides' final scene and end this film with a triumphant Medea who riding the chariot of the Sun god returns to her origin and culture. Equally, the infanticide acquires a different connotation in these two readings. For Alvaro the killing of children recalls a sort of 'euthanasia': by inflicting death Medea saves her children from the pain of persecutions. In Pasolini, the act of killing, carried out while Medea sings a ritual lullaby, performs the role of a cleansing sacrifice. Both texts, however, show how violence is an inborn trait of humankind: the violence of the primitive, matriarchal and heroic mind is a spark that cannot be extinguished by patriarchal, antiheroic and modern societies.

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[1] On the modern reception of the myth one may recall, for instance, the study of Rambaux, (1972); the collections of miscellaneous essays by Uglione (1997); Gentili and Perusino (2000); Hall, Macintosh and Taplin (2000); Clauss and Johnston (1997); and more recently Foley (2004), Griffiths (2006), Oster (2006), Zimmermann (2009: 191ff. on the contrast between Jason's western society based on spoken words and Medea's eastern non-verbal world) and Bartel (2010).

[2] On Brendan Kennelly's Medea see McDonald (1997: 311): "Greece informs Ireland; England may learn from Medea, even as Jason did").

[3] McDonald (1997: 302).

[4] For instance, during the years of student unrest in France and Italy, an unusual experiment was staged in the 'Teatro Stabile' in Naples in which the script of the play was rewritten each night at the end of the performance according to the suggestions of the audience.

[5] On this post-colonial version of the myth, see recently the article of Croce (2006).

[6] Further examples can be drawn from Caiazza (1989; 1990; 1993); McDonald (1997:298-9); Lochhead (2000).

[7] Genette (1982:14)

[8] Cf. Alvaro (1966:166). Since the play was conceived in 1949 it also bears resonance to racial discrimination and the humiliation of concentration camps in fascist Italy and Nazi Germany

[9] My analysis of Pasolini's *Visioni della Medea* is essentially based on the study of the screenplay (1970) rather than on the film itself. All translations are mine save for Euripides' *Medea* for which I use the translation of Davie (1996).

[10] See, for instance, a glowing review in the then leading Italian journal on cinema and theatre: "Tema sviluppato dallo scrittore mirabilmente. Un prodigioso svariare di idee" (F. Palmieri, 'Sipario', August-September issue, 1949).

[11] See e.g. Mimoso-Ruiz (1981: 217f.).

[12] Alvaro (1966: 113-8).

[13] Medea is part of a trilogy, the other two films being E*dipo Re* (1967), based on the eponymous play of Sophocles, and the *Appunti per una Orestiade Africana* (1970) to which one must add an Italian translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in 1960, and several articles and letters written by Pasolini himself on several aspects of the Greek tragedy

[14] Hesiod mentions a certain Chiron in his *Theogony* (vv. 1000-02) in which one reads that Medea: "… having copulated with Jason, shepherd of the people, begot a son, Medeius, whom Chiron, son of Fillira, brought up". The centaur Chiron embodies also a certain degree of autobiography. On this aspect see Pasolini's own words reported in Duflot (1983:76): "Non si tratta di dualismo, nè di sdoppiamento. Questo incontro, ossia questa compresenza dei due centauri, significa che la cosa sacra, una volta dissacrata, non per questo viene meno. L'essere sacro rimane giustapposto all'essere dissacrato. Con questo intendo dire che, vivendo, ho realizzato una serie di superamenti, di dissacrazioni, di evoluzioni. Quello che ero, però, prima di questi superamenti, di queste dissacrazioni, di queste evoluzioni, non è scomparso". On this anthropological reading of the myth see also the analysis of Fusillo (1996: 175ff.).

[15] See, for instance, this note (p. 139) in *Petrolio* (1975, unpublished until 1992), the last and uncompleted work of Pasolini: "Centauro – coincidenza Grecia antica con Africa".

[16] This feature fits with Pasolini's belief that "the non-verbal … is nothing else but a different verbalism: that of the *language of reality*". See Pasolini, (1972: 267-9, esp. 268).

[17] See Euripides, *Medea* 252-8 "However, we are not in the same position, you and I. You have your city here and the homes where your fathers have lived; you enjoy life's pleasures and the companionship of those you love. But what of me? Abandoned, homeless, I am a

cruel husband's plaything, the plunder he brought back from a foreign land, with no mother to turn to, no brother or kinsman to rescue me from this sea of troubles and give me shelter".

[18] Euripides, *Medea* 228-9 "The man who was the world to me – oh, how I know the truth of this!- has proved to be the foulest of traitors, my own husband!".

[19] See e.g. Euripides, *Medea* 230-1 "Of all creatures that have life and reason we women are the most miserable of specimens!"

[20] The Creon of Euripides does not hide his responsibility for having decided Medea's expulsion; cf. Euripides, *Medea* 274-6 "I am sole arbiter of this decree and shall not return to my palace until I banish you beyond this country's boundaries". By contrast, Alvaro's Creon argues that his decree to ban Medea has been endorsed by the people of Corinth; see Act I scene 10: "I myself meant to give you the decree, which does not only reflect my will but that of my people as well". Ho tenuto io stesso a portarti il decreto, che non è soltanto mio, ma del popolo".

[21] Cf. e.g. Euripides, *Medea* 282f. "I fear that you may adduce to my daughter some irreparable evil".

[22] A similar sympathetic approach is presented by Grillparzer (1821).

[23] See e.g. Euripides, *Medea* 340-7.

[24] Cf. Euripides, *Medea* 178-81 "Let it never be said I have failed to lend a helping hand to friends. Go and bring her here from the house. Tell her that we also wish her well".

[25] The city of Corinth, protected by its wall, is the emblem of a rational world facing an horizon of irrationality. See a similar metaphor used by Pasolini during his interview with Duflot (1983: 78): "Varcate le mura che cingono la città (la *ratio*), si apre l'orizzonte infinito, inizia la dismisura punita dagli dei. In questo caso, l'eros esce dalle norme umane. Edipo uccide la madre, Medea i figli". On the signification of landscapes in Pasolini's films see P. Michelakis (2001: 241-54, esp. 247 and 251).

[26] One should note that the roles of Jason and Medea are played respectively by the northern Italian athlete Girotti and the Greek, southern Mediterranean Maria Callas.

[27] See also the analysis of D'Ascia (2004: 36): "Medea è abbastanza moderna per avvertire la perdita delle radici, ma troppo antica per agire come soggetto e superare così la contraddizione."

[28] See a passage of Pasolini (2000: 199): "Non si può insomma ignorare il fenomeno di una specie di esautoramento della parola, legato al deperimento delle lingue umanistiche delle élites, che sono state finora, le lingue-guida".

[29] According to Genette (1982: 8-12) the act of quoting a text is the most explicit form of intertextuality since a quotation is 'physical' presence of a given text into another one.

[30] This is a belief stressed several times by Pasolini in his letters.

[31] For instance, in Act I scene 6 Medea, foreseeing the tragic events lurking in the near future, reminds Creon's messenger of her condition of 'refugee': "we are here only as refugees", she emphasizes.

[32] Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1454b 1-2, 1461b 18-21.

[33] This aspect of Jason's psychology will be picked up and explored further by Pasolini in his construction of Jason as a 'modern' hero.

[34] See Euripides, *Medea* 551ff.

[35] See e.g. Euripides, *Medea* 825-6 (the Athenians are sons of a sacred land).

[36] For the eulogy of Athens in these lines of Euripides' Medea see Pucci (1980: 91-127).

[37] See Mimoso Ruiz (1981: 230). Different, of course, are the readers' and viewers' responses to Medea's infanticide in Euripides since in his version of the myth it is only after Medea is

certain of asylum in Athens that she plans her revenge. Cf. also Ciani (1999: 21) who speaks of a "rovesciamento di prospettiva che chiude a Medea ogni via di scampo".

[38] Christie (2000: 150).

[39] Pasolini's own note to scene 36.

[40] On the mediocrity of Alvaro's Jason see also the analysis of Ieranò (2000: 177-97, esp. 179f.) who offers insightful parallels with other modern Jasons such as that of Anouilh and Pavese.

[41] Alvaro (1966: 117).

[42] See Ieranò (2000: 194): "La tragedia di Medea sfuma in quella di Creusa. I sublimi patimenti degli eroi si stemperano nel dolore muto dell'umanità comune."