

**THE SOURCES OF THE MYTH OF MEDEA
IN THE POSITIVE LIGHT
OF THE PRE-EURIPIDIAN INTERPRETATIONS
AND THEIR EVOLUTION
IN THE NEGATIVE SHADE**

Vazhynska Olena Ihorivna,

Postgraduate student

Taras Shevchenko University of Kiev

The present article is dedicated to the analysis of the pre-Euripidian sources and literary premises of a classical version of the myth of Medea. The very first references and details of the character are being examined in this research in order to give the readers a full comprehension of the construction of an image of a barbarian, murder, mother and lover which interlace in all its complicity of features.

Key words: allusions of Medea in pre-Euripidian literature, sources of the myth, construction of the image of Medea.

In a world literary tradition the source of the myth of Medea is considered to be the homonymous drama of Euripides, dated 431 BC. Due to the great influence and authority of the ancient poet, his drama became a source of a reference for a range of distinguished authors, such as Corneille, Grillparzer, Alvaro, Anouilh, Tomassini, Theodorakis, Müller, etc.¹. However, **the aim** of this research is to reveal the existence of the image of Medea long time before the version of Euripides, thus, we will examine the first mentions of the hypostasis in the early pre-Euripidian literature that existed long time before the creation of the classical variant. According to the purpose of the research paper, we can determine the following **objectives**:

- 1) to identify the pre-Euripidian texts related to the myth of Medea;
- 2) to define the first allusions of Medea and Argonauts in the Antiquity;
- 3) to confront the early mentioning with the subsequent image of Medea;
- 4) to reveal the positive nature of the character in pre-Euripidian literature.

Thus, the **object** of the research is the works of Homer, Hesiod, Pindar, Eumelus of Corinth, Carcius of Naupactus, Mimnermus and Herodotus that existed long time before the Euripides' version; while the **matter** of the discourse is the evolution of the image of Medea and the alteration of its perception by the ancient authors.

The **originality** consists in the thesis of existence of the positive image of Medea in the early ancient literature, which gradually evolves into the incarnation of all the evil due to historical changes and inability to justify the deeds of the barbarian.

According to numerous previous researches, the first allusions of Argonauts and Medea, wife of the leader of expedition – Jason, appear in the pre-Homeric epos, however, the only explicit image of the barbarian magician and the description of the voyage

¹ For a full list of works based on the myth of Medea, consult.: Caiazza, *Medea: fortuna di un mito*, "Dioniso" 59, 1989, pp. 9–84, *ibidem* 60, 1990, pp. 82–118; *ibidem* 63, 1993, pp. 121–141.; *ibidem* 64, pp. 155–166; I. Toppani, *Perché Medea ebbe tanta fortuna?*, "Sileno" 21, 1995, pp. 139–60; J. Schlondorff, *Medea: Euripides, Seneca, Corneille, Cherubini*, Grillparzer, Anouilh, Jeffers, Braun, München-Wien 1963; M. G. Ciani (a cura di), *Euripide, Seneca, Grillparzer, Alvaro, Medea. Variazioni sul mito*, Venezia 2003.

is depicted in "Odyssey"², the episode when Circe admonishes Odysseus to take the direction towards Trinkarsus, the path that was surmounted only once, by Argonauts:

ἔνθεν μὲν γὰρ πέτραι ἐπηρεφέες, προτὶ δ' αὐτὰς
 κῦμα μέγα ῥοχθεὶ κυανώπιδος Ἀμφιτρίτης:
 Πλαγκτὰς δὴ τοι τὰς γε θεοὶ μάκαρες καλέουσι.
 τῇ μὲν τ' οὐδὲ ποτητὰ παρέρχεται οὐδὲ πέλειαι
 τρήρωνες, ταί τ' ἀμβροσίην Διὶ πατρὶ φέρουσιν,
 ἀλλὰ τε καὶ τῶν αἰὲν ἀφαιρεῖται λίς πέτρῃ:
 ἀλλ' ἄλλην ἐνίησι πατὴρ ἐναρίθμιον εἶναι.
 τῇ δ' οὐ πῶ τις νηὺς φύγεν ἀνδρῶν, ἢ τις ἴκηται,
 ἀλλὰ θ' ὁμοῦ πίνακάς τε νεῶν καὶ σώματα φωτῶν
 κύμαθ' ἄλός φορέουσι πυρός τ' ὀλοοῖο θύελλα.
 οἳ δὴ κείνη γε παρέπλω ποντοπόρος νηὺς,
 Ἄργῳ πᾶσι μέλουσα, παρ' Αἰήταο πλέουσα.
 καὶ νῦ κε τὴν ἐνθ' ὠκα βάλεν μέγασσά ποτὶ πέτρας,
 ἀλλ' Ἥρη παρέπεμψε, ἐπεὶ φίλος ἦεν Ἰήσων³
 [Homer, *Odyssey*, XII, v. 59–72].

The description of the colliding cliffs contaminates two versions of the myth: the first one insists on the sea breaker of the cliffs provoking the risk of integrity of the ships, while the second underlines the danger of the clashing rocks of this particular region. Such particularity of double interpretation derives from the previous epic poems, which have permitted classical poets to interpret this threat for sailors in their according to their own vision. Thus, Homer gives the name to dangerous cliffs – Scilla and Cariddi, personifying them into two mythical creatures. Pindar and Antimachus used the cliffs to describe the unknown passage of the Bosphore, referring to the region as to the least explored by the sailors. Thereby, the figure of Medea has a positive shade in early ancient works, as her magical powers were correlated with other mysterious creatures and events that people were not yet able to explain, thus didn't dare to attribute a negative interpretation of the divine powers. In late ancient works Medea, on the contrary, became an explanation of all the unfavorable occurrences that were still remaining inexplicable. For instance, in "Theogony" Hesiod doesn't give detailed description of the character of magician, but only mentions that she was a wife of Jason and gave a birth to their son, Medus [Hesiod, *Theogony*, 956–62, 993–1002]. While subsequent references of Pindar and He-

² Explanations about the hypothesis of Homer's "Odyssey" being the first source of explicit description of Medea can be found in E. Will, *Korinthiaka. Recherches sur l'histoire et la civilisation de Corinthe des origines aux guerres médiques*, Paris 1955, p. 129. For the iconographic documentation see C. Isler-Kerényi, *Immagini di Medea*, in *Medea nella letteratura e nell' arte*, a cura di B. Gentili e F. Perusino, Venezia 2000, pp. 117–138.

³ [59] For on the one hand are beetling crags, and against them [60] roars the great wave of dark-eyed Amphitrite; the Planctae do the blessed gods call these. Thereby not even winged things may pass, no, not the timorous doves that bear ambrosia to father Zeus, but the smooth rock ever snatches away one even of these, [65] and the father sends in another to make up the tale. And thereby has no ship of men ever yet escaped that has come thither, but the planks of ships and bodies of men are whirled confusedly by the waves of the sea and the blasts of baneful fire. One seafaring ship alone has passed thereby, [70] that Argo famed of all, on her voyage from Aeetes, and even her the wave would speedily have dashed there against the great crags, had not Here sent her through, for that Jason was dear to her. [Murray, XII, v. 59–72].

rodotos become estranged from the positive image: in "Pythian" Pindar describes Medea as a prophetess of bad news, foretelling the Argonauts all the dangers that they might meet [Pindar, Pythian 4, Olympian 13.53–54]. Herodotus uses the image of Medea to explain the Persian-Greek conflict and puts the magician in the middle of it, blaming her for the aggravation of the tense relations between the nations [Herodotus, 1.2, 7.62].

In order to explain the origin of magic powers, poets decide to reveal its evil nature and begin to emphasize the bounds between Medea and Circe. This way, in Pindar's work Medea's magic powers are represented as a destructive force, this idea evolves in "Medea" of Euripides. The great classical poet goes in details of the personality of the magician; he is the first one to lay out the specifics of the portrait of Medea; that is one of the reasons why his work became fundamental for the later re-writings of the myth. However, Euripides proposes a completely negative and dark image by providing circumstances of the murders committed by the magician: murder of her brother and Pelias, deaths of Creon, Creusa and those kings who were appearing on the way of Argonauts, not to mention her own children. Thereby, Medea becomes a vengeful and furious murderer in the ancient literature.

Coming back to earlier versions of the myth, it is impossible not to mention the work of Eumelus of Corinth (known from retellings by Pausanias), who represents Medea as a legitimate empress of Corinth. In particular, Eumelus of Corinth underlines her contribution to the formation of an adequate city-state of Corinth.

βασιλεύειν μὲν δὴ δι' αὐτὴν Ἰάσωνα ἐν Κορίνθῳ, Μηδεία δὲ παῖδας μὲν γίνεσθαι, τὸ δὲ αἰεὶ τικτόμενον κατακρύπτειν αὐτὸ ἐς τὸ ἱερὸν φέρουσαν τῆς Ἥρας, κατακρύπτειν δὲ ἀθανάτους ἕσεσθαι νομίζουσιν: τέλος δὲ αὐτὴν τε μαθεῖν ὡς ἡμαρτήκοι τῆς ἐλπίδος καὶ ἅμα ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἰάσονος φωραθεῖσαν - οὐ γὰρ αὐτὸν ἔχειν δεομένη συγγνώμην, ἀποπλέοντα δὲ ἐς Ἴωλκὸν οἴχεσθαι -, τούτων δὲ ἔνεκα ἀπελθεῖν καὶ Μήδειαν παρδοῦσαν Σισύφῳ τὴν ἀρχήν⁴ [Pausanias, II 3,11].

Moreover, Eumelus of Corinth deviates from connections with Circea and associates Medea with a positive figure of Aphrodite, according to whose will Jason becomes a legal husband of the magician:

Μηδείας δὲ ἐπὶ θρόνου καθήμενης Ἰάσων ἐν δεξιᾷ, τῇ δὲ Ἀφροδίτῃ παρέστηκε: γέγραπται δὲ καὶ ἐπίγραμμα ἐπ' αὐτοῖς: Μήδειαν Ἰάσων γάμει, κέλεται δ' Ἀφροδίτα⁵ [Pausanias, V, 18, 1–3].

Already in 5–6th centuries B.C. the role of Medea diminishes and, under such condition, creates its double interpretation. Carcius of Naupactus in his "Poems about Naupatica" attributes Medea a secondary role in Jason's achievements: she is not intervening during Jason's trials to obtain the Golden Fleece, nor leaves her motherland on her own will. Only upon decision of Gods she falls in love with her kidnapper, Jason:

⁴ Through her Jason was king in Corinth, and Medea, as her children were born, carried each to the sanctuary of Hera and concealed them, doing so in the belief that so they would be immortal. At last she learned that her hopes were vain, and at the same time she was detected by Jason. When she begged for pardon he refused it, and sailed away to Iolcus. For these reasons Medea too departed, and handed over the kingdom to Sisyphus. [Jones, II, 3, 11].

⁵ Medea is seated upon a throne, while Jason stands on her right and Aphrodite on her left. On them is an inscription: Jason weds Medea, as Aphrodite bids. [Jones, V, 18, 3].

ὁ τὰ Ναυπακτικὰ πεποικηκῶς ὑπὸ Ἀφροδίτης φησὶ τὸν Αἰήτην
κατακοιμηθῆναι... δεδειπνηκότων παρ' αὐτῶι τῶν Ἀργοναυτῶν
καὶ κοιμωμένων, διὰ τὸ βούλεσθαι αὐτὸν τὴν ναῦν ἐμπρῆσαι· δὴ
τότ' ἄρ' Αἰήτηι πόθον ἔμβαλε δὴ Ἀφροδίτη
Εὐρυλύτης φιλόττει μιγήμεναι, ἧς ἀλόχοιο,
κηδομένη φρεσὶν ἧσιν, ὅπως μετ' ἄεθλον Ἰήσων
νοστήσει οἰκόνδε σὺν ἀγχεμάχοις ἐτάροισιν.
ὁ δὲ Ἴδμων συνῆκε τὸ γεγονός καὶ φυσι·
"φευγέμεναι μέγαροιο θοὴν διὰ νύκτα μέλαιναν."
τὴν δὲ Μήδειαν τὴν ποδοιοφίαν ἀκούσασαν ἀναστᾶσαν
συνεξορμήσαι.

φευγέμεν ἐκ Μείλικη⁶ [Carmen Naupactium, schol. Ap. Rhod. IV 86].

Pindar reconfirms the unwillingness of Medea to leave her home, but, on the other hand, attributes her the role of a savior who protects the Argonauts and her bellowed from all the dangers on their way to Greece:

ἔπεται δ' ἐν ἐκάστῳ
μέτρον: νομῆσθι δὲ καιρὸς ἄριστος.
ἐγὼ δὲ ἴδιος ἐν κοινῷ σταλείς
μῆτιν τε γαρύων παλαιγόνων
πόλεμόν τ' ἐν ἠρωϊαῖς ἀρεταῖσιν
οὐ ψεύσομ' ἀμφὶ Κορίνθῳ, Σίσυφον μὲν πυκνότατον παλάμαις
ὡς θεόν,
καὶ τὰν πατρὸς ἀντία Μήδειαν θεμέναν γάμον αὐτᾶ,
ναὶ σώτειραν Ἀργοῖ καὶ προπόλοις⁷
[Pindar, Olympian, XIII 47–54].

The theme of love⁸ is widely judged later on, as many poets tend to regret the decision of Jason to take Medea with him to Greece. Mimnermus was the first one to express his regret in the poem and his disappointment echoes with Euripides', who blamed Medea in all the misfortunes of Greece that she had brought from Colchide.

οὐδέ κοτ' ἂν μέγα κῶας ἀνήγαγεν αὐτὸς Ἰήσων
ἐξ Αἴης τελέσας ἀλγινόεσσαν ὁδόν,
ὑβριστῆ Πελίῃ τελέων χαλεπῆρες ἄεθλον,
οὐδ' ἂν ἐπ' Ὀκεανοῦ καλὸν ἴκοντο ῥόον.

⁶ The author of the Naupactica says that Aietes was put to sleep by Aphrodite . . . after the Argonauts had dined with him and were going to bed, and she did this because he intended to set fire to the ship: Then high-born Aphrodite cast desire upon Aietes to unite in love with Eurlylyte his wife; she was concerned in her mind that after his great trial Jason should come safe home with his combative comrades. Idmon understood what had happened, and said: "Flee from the hall, swift through the dark night!" As in fr. 4, the task is that of yoking Aietes' fire-breathing oxen. And Medea, hearing the noise of feet, got up and set off with them. [Naupactium, 278–279].

⁷ [47] Each thing has its limit; knowing it is the best and most timely way. And I, sailing on my own course for the common good, [50] and singing of the wisdom and the battles of ancient men in their heroic excellence, shall not falsify the story of Corinth; I shall tell of Sisyphus, who, like a god, was very shrewd in his devising, and of Medea, who resolved on her own marriage against her father's will, and thus saved the ship Argo and its seamen. [Morice, XII, 47–54].

⁸ The love of Medea is depicted in poems by Alcman [fr. 163 PMGF], Ibis [fr. 291 PMGF], Simonide [fr. 53/558 PMG], Pindar [Pyth, IV 11], Apollonius of Rhodes [Ap. Rhod., IV 811–815].

Αιήταο πόλιν, τόθι τ' ὠκέος Ἡελίοιο
ἀκτῖνες χρυσέω κείαται ἐν θαλάμῳ
ἸΩκεανοῦ παρὰ χεῖλος, ἴν' ὄχετο θεῖος Ἴήσων.
[Mimnermus, fr. 10 *PETFr.*]

Herodotus uses this regret as an argument to justify his theory of the origin of a conflict between Persians and Greeks and proposes a theory of two nations settling a score with each other and opposing two ideologically different cultures⁹:

Ἐλληνας αἰτίους τῆν δευτέρης ἀδικίης γενέσθαι:
καταπλώσαντας γάρ μακρῆ νηί ἐς Αἴαν τε τὴν Κολχίδα καὶ ἐπὶ
Φᾶδιν ποταμόν, ἐνθεῦτεν, διαπρηξαμένους καὶ τᾶλλα τῶν εἵνεκεν
ἀπίκατο, ἀρπάσαι τοῦ βασιλέος τὴν θυγατέρα Μηδείην.
πέμψαντά δὲ τὸν Κόλχων βασιλέα ἐς τὴν Ἑλλάδα κήρυκα αἰτέειν
τε δίκας τῆς ἀρπαγῆς καὶ ἀπαιτέειν τὴν θυγατέρα. τοὺς δὲ
ὑποκρίνασθαι ὡς οὐδὲ ἐκεῖνοι Ἰοῦς τῆς Ἀργείης ἔδοσαν σφι δίκας
τῆς ἀρπαγῆς: οὐδὲ ὧν αὐτοὶ δώσειν ἐκείνοισι.¹⁰

[Herodotus, I, 2, 1–3]

As a consequence of our short overview of the ancient sources of the myth of Medea, we came to the conclusion that the character of Medea in antique literature has evolved from a positive image of a savior and a guide to the source of all evil. Euripides' work becomes a breaking point in the evolution of the image of Medea and in later works, such as Apollonius' "Argonautica" and Apollodorus' "Medea", we see his strong influence. The mythographic evolution of Medea leads to the construction of a pure negative image, a personification of hate, infanticide and fury. Thus, our short discourse into the past reveals the positive nature of the origin of myth about Medea.

Статтю присвячено аналізу до-Еврипідових витоків класичної версії міфу про Медею. Були проаналізовані найперші згадки та деталі образу з метою реконструкції образу варварки, вбивці, матері та коханки, що переплітаються в парадоксальності образу. Виявлені позитивні праобрази Медеї на провагу пізнім версіям міфу.

Ключові слова: образ Медеї в до-Еврипідових творах, витки міфу, побудова образу Медеї.

Статья посвящена анализу до-Еврипидовых истоков классической версии мифа про Медею. Были проанализированы самые первые воспоминания и детали образа с целью реконструкции образа варварки, убийцы, матери, любовницы, которые переплетаются в парадоксальности образа. Выявлены позитивные праобразы Медеи в противоположность более поздним версиям мифа.

Ключевые слова: образ Медеи в до-Еврипидовых сочинениях, истоки мифа, построение образа Медеи.

⁹ Likewise, this is the reason why the word "barbarian" or "foreign" had a negative connotation in Ancient Greece – due to numerous invasions, especially after the Persian-Greek conflict, it started to associate with an "enemy".

¹⁰ [1] But after this (they say), it was the Greeks who were guilty of the second wrong. [2] They sailed in a long ship to Aea, a city of the Colchians, and to the river Phasis: and when they had done the business for which they came, they carried off the king's daughter Medea. [3] When the Colchian king sent a herald to demand reparation for the robbery and restitution of his daughter, the Greeks replied that, as they had been refused reparation for the abduction of the Argive Io, they would not make any to the Colchians. [Godley, 1.2.1–1.2.3]

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