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The Country Wife.

Between Pragmatic Analysis and Translation

Edited by Alba Graziano

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GHERARDO UGOLINI*

Medea and Prometheus. Two Archetypes of Greek Tragedy on the Stage: Ancient Theatre Festival - Syracuse 2023

Abstract

The programme of the 58th edition of the Ancient Theatre Festival at Syracuse (11 May – 2 July 2023) presented two of the most renowned Greek tragedies to have survived, which also happen to be two archetypes of ancient myth. The *Medea* of Euripides, directed by Federico Tiezzi, translated by Massimo Fusillo, appears as a sort of Ibsenesque ‘bourgeois drama’ and focalises on the struggle between two cultures and two forms of violence: the instinctual and natural passion of an archaic society expressed by Medea against the conscious ferocity of Jason, who places power and wealth above feelings. The staging of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound* directed by Leo Muscato and translated by Roberto Vecchioni is particularly successful with its interpretation of Scythia as a desolate, decaying wasteland where the derelict ruins of factory buildings are the dominating feature. The physicality of Alessandro Albertin’s portrayal of the Titan Prometheus is extremely effective in rendering the character’s rage, suffering and pride and his refusal to submit to the will of Zeus.

KEYWORDS: Medea; Euripides; Prometheus; Aeschylus; Greek tragedy; National Institute of Ancient Drama; Federico Tiezzi

Medea has come back to the Greek Theatre of Syracuse. And it has been a comeback in style judging by the heartfelt welcome on the part of the public not only at the play’s first night on the 12th May 2023 but every following performance, including those at the Teatro Grande at Pompeii (1st and 2nd July 2023) and at the Roman Theatre in Verona (12th and 13th September 2023).¹ Starting with Ettore Romagnoli’s 1927 production, Euripides’ *Medea*

¹ *Medea* by Euripides, director Federico Tiezzi, Italian translation Massimo Fusillo, scenic project Marco Rossi, costumes Giovanna Buzzi, lighting Gianni Pollini, choir master Francesca Della Monica, assistant director Giovanni Scandella, Original chorus and prologue music Silvia Colasanti (with the collaboration of the Rome Opera House Children’s Choir), Assistant stage designer Francesca Sgariboldi, Costume designer assistant Ambra Schumacher, Choir and vocal arrangement assistant William Caruso, Stage director Nanni Ragusa, Assistant stage director Dario Castro, cast: Laura

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has been staged many times by the National Institute of Ancient Drama and employing directors and actors of exceptional artistic merit. Medea has been interpreted by, among others, Valeria Moriconi (twice), the first time in 1972 (directed by Franco Enriquez, in the translation by Carlo Diano) and the second in 1996 (directed by Mario Missiroli in Maria Grazia Ciani's translation), Maddalena Crippa in 2004 (directed by Peter Stein in Dario del Corno's translation) and Elisabetta Pozzi in 2009 (director Krzysztof Zanussi, translator Maria Grazia Ciani).

This year it was Laura Marinoni's turn to put on the robes of the princess of Colchis. Marinoni has been the star performer of the annual presentations of classical drama at Syracuse in recent years; she played Helen in 2019 and then Clytemnestra in 2021 and 2022. Federico Tiezzi's direction is founded on a specific interpretative key, that of the traditional idea of "individual retaliation" on the part of Jason's ex-wife, but should be understood rather as "a conflict between two different conceptions of strength, between an archaic society and a post-industrial one" as the director has explained in a note (Tiezzi 2023,16). In 2015 he had already staged Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* at Syracuse and had also directed other ancient Greek plays among which Aristophanes' *The Birds* (2005-2006) and Sophocles' *Antigone* (2018). His direction of *Medeamaterial* by the German playwright Heiner Müller should also not be forgotten. Tiezzi has explained that his intention was to turn Euripides' *Medea* into an Ibsenesque or Strindbergian "bourgeois drama", which was definitely an original idea, but one not lacking in risks, the first of these being the danger of trivialising a story that Euripides imagined against the mythical background of a Corinth at indeterminate moment of a remote past. In actual fact the *mise-en-scène* links several thematic points with one another, including the relationship between a man and a woman and the

Marinoni (Medea), Alessandro Averone (Jason), Roberto Latini (Creon), Luigi Tabita (Aegeus), Debora Zuin (Nurse), Riccardo Livermore (Pedagogue), Sandra Toffolatti (Messenger), Francesca Ciocchetti (first Corifean), Simonetta Cartia (Chorus leader), Alessandra Gigli, Dario Guidi, Anna Charlotte Barbera, Valentina Corrao, Valentina Elia, Caterina Fontana, Francesca Gabucci, Irene Mori, Aurora Miriam Scala, Maddalena Serratore, Giulia Valentini, Claudia Zappia (Chorus), Matteo Paguni, Francesco Cutale (children of Medea), Jacopo Sarotti, Alberto Carbone Carlo Alberto Denoyè (Creon's men), Andrea Bassoli, Alberto Carbone, Sebastiano Caruso, Alessandra Cosentino, Gaia Cozzolino, Sara De Lauretis, Carlo Alberto Denoyè, Lorenzo Ficara, Leonardo Filoni, Ferdinando Iebba, Althea Mara Luana Iorio, Denise Kendall-Jones, Domenico Lamparelli, Federica Leuci, Emilio Lumastro, Arianna Martinelli, Moreno Mondì, Alice Pennino, Edoardo Pipitone, Jacopo Sarotti, Mariachiara Signorello (Chorus). Euripides' *Medea* directed by Federico Tiezzi and produced by INDA, saw its first performance at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse on the 12th May 2023, with repeat performances until the 24th June 2023. There were further performances at the Teatro Grande of Pompeii (1st and 2nd July 2023) and at the Roman Theatre in Verona (12th and 13th September 2023).

transformation which occurs when disappointment turns erotic passion into the desire for implacable revenge.

The interpretation of the play as a bourgeois drama is especially noticeable in the scenography and the costumes: in the vast circular space of the orchestra the interior of a modern house can be made out, represented by cuboid geometrical structures created from faintly illuminated neon tubing. The house is furnished with tables, benches and chairs in black and white and decorated by classical busts on marble columns. Medea's home, far from being that bare house in the suburbs we imagine from Euripides, but an apartment which is as luxurious as it is chilly.

The first scene opens with an effective dramatic stratagem: two semi-choruses dressed in white come on stage with a woman between them. Her face is covered by a mask in the form of a bird and it is clear that this is Medea. They perform rituals of prayer and supplication in an incomprehensible language (probably that of Colchis) predicting the death of innocent beings. This is an addition to Euripides' text but makes a great impression on the public. The scene is alluding to a past event when Medea was still in Colchis and presided over religious rites. But this is not simply intended to characterise the protagonist's 'barbarian' dimension right from the start. What Tiezzi is aiming at with this prologue of an almost oneiric quality is to suggest that all that happens from this point on could be interpreted as a "dream" on Medea's part, a product of the character's unconscious, a "vision", to use a term dear to Pier Paolo Pasolini, emanating from Medea herself.²

The nurse (Debora Zuin) has a Balkan accent, a housekeeper's overall and a white suitcase from which she unpacks old costumes from the far-off homeland. Hers is a particularly successful interpretation: a symbol not only of her affection for her mistress but also of their attachment to Colchis and their condition as exiles. It is with her that the Corinthian women who make up the chorus and who are dressed as cleaners in blue overalls and caps (Fig.1) converse, while the rhythms of the dance are transmuted by the movements of cleaning floors and furniture.

Medea's entrance on to the stage is preceded by the anguished cries and violent curses she launches from the wings ("I want to die", "Can't you see I'm suffering", "I hope you and your father drop dead"). Laura Marinoni enters the scene regally, dressed in a costume covered in feathers of a colour which oscillates between blue and black. At first her face is hidden by the same mask of a bird of prey she was wearing in the prologue. The use of animal masks is a *Leitmotif* of this production. These are indeed totemic masks

² I am referring to *Visioni di Medea* (Pasolini 2001, 1207-88), the preliminary version of the 1969 film *Medea*, with Maria Callas (Medea), Massimo Girotti (Creon), Giuseppe Gentile (Jason), Gerard Weiss (Centaur), Margareth Clémenti (Glauce).

whose meaning is symbolic and may perhaps be interpreted as follows: Medea's mask indicates a universe impossible to grasp, whose principal components are freedom and rapacity; the children's rabbit masks symbolise their predestination to be sacrificed as innocent victims; the crocodile masks worn by Creon and his henchmen are clearly emblems of power and ferocity. The expedient of masks could be seen to be superfluous or excessive, but this is not the case, particularly as they are only worn for a short time.

Creon (Roberto Latini), in his elegant dark suit, is a pitiless subjugator who bullies his bodyguards, but who, in the dialogue with Medea ends up by allowing her what she asks for: a delay of twenty-four hours before she is exiled (Fig.2).



Fig. 1 Medea (Laura Marinoni) and the Chorus of Corinthian Women. Photo AFI Siracusa



Fig. 2 Medea (Laura Marinoni) and Creon (Roberto Latini). Photo AFI Siracusa.

Jason (Alessandro Averone) is also attired in a modern middle-class manner with a tie and a dark overcoat. But beneath the clothes of an apparently respectable gentleman is concealed a lucid and ferocious violence, one which puts wealth and power before feelings. However he ignores the fact that he will have to reckon with another kind of violence, the primitive and instinctual violence of Medea, which derives from the force of nature itself and which once unleashed is unstoppable. At this point it is worth quoting the director's own thoughts (Tiezzi 2023, 16):

Jason, too, in his own way, is a purveyor of violence: but his is violence of a different kind – a symbolic kind which today we would call “neocapitalist”. This violence is dictated by expediency – whether political, dynastic or economic. Jason embodies, and this not too covertly, the violence hidden in every advanced society, always sublimated but never transcended, instead often converted into more subtle practices, which may be less perceptible but never less brutal . . . *Medea* is a force field in which two “modalities of violence” challenge one another. Medea herself affirms the superiority of the force pertaining to her world in defiance of the one in Jason's; she opposes the physical destruction of the family to Jason's proposition of its symbolic destruction. In a certain sense she is really the one who “wins”; as Roland Barthes maintains when writing about the Marquis de Sade, the letter always defeats the symbol, the event prevails over the structure justifying it, the body comes before any and every metaphor. The children succumb and perish together with the very idea of a future. Silence alone remains: the image of disaster and of an impossible return to the native land, to a divine “*before*” that may, as in Freud's case studies, only be dreamed of.

The scenes of the dialogues between Medea, the rejected wife, and Jason, the new husband of the Corinthian princess are very successful moments in the production. This is also the merit of Massimo Fusillo's excellent translation; here as elsewhere he manages to render the Greek text in a vocabulary and syntax which are both comprehensible and fluid, without ever falling into banality and without too much modernisation. The proxemic interaction between the two protagonists is certainly a long way from respecting ancient modalities: Medea and Jason touch one another, fondle one another, exchange caresses. She embraces him, then bites his hand while repeatedly calling him “Bastard!” in a scathing tone of voice. She kisses him passionately before roughly pushing him away. Traditionalist spectators may well have something to say here but in the context of ‘bourgeois drama’ Tiezzi's solutions are perfectly congruent and they work.

In contrast to the sombre hues of the bourgeois costumes worn by Creon and Jason, Aegeus (Luigi Tabita) sports a white suit with a Panama hat on his head. The solution of presenting him as a dandy, elegant and refined, sincerely

concerned about what will happen to Medea seems a good one. His is an external perspective which differs completely with the cynical, pusillanimous utilitarian dynamics of Creon and Jason, the other male protagonists.

The key event of the play, the infanticide, is the artistic and dramaturgical apex of this production and is without doubt its most moving and most spectacular moment. Neither could it have been otherwise, in reality, if we consider the fact that the murder of her children has become, from Euripides onward, the indelible marker that characterises Medea.³ The act of violence does not take place on stage, but is related by a messenger (here a woman, Sandra Toffolati), following Euripides' original script. But the narration of the event relies heavily upon scenic chromatism: lasers envelop the site of the crime with red light, while offstage the endless screams of the butchered children can be heard, overwhelming the chorus. The music – which includes excerpts from *Mulholland Drive* by Angelo Badalamenti, Zbigniew Preisner's *Lacrimosa*, Franz Schubert's *Gretchen am Spinnrade* (Gretchen at her Spinning-Wheel) from Goethe's *Faust*, and fragments of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* – create an aura of mystery around the sacrifice carried out by the murderess mother, torn apart by the dilemma between her love for her children and the compulsive need not to be despised and derided by her enemies. The finale takes on the emotional atmosphere of a sacred esoteric rite, with the bodies of the children exposed to the public and the chorus of Corinthian women who are cleaning the floor after the slaughter and rhythmically moving the blood-soaked clothes. Meanwhile Medea, who has been hoisted by a crane up on to a cart (Helios' chariot), pitilessly celebrates her triumph.

One aspect of the production should not, perhaps, need to be mentioned. Tiezzi's direction and Fusillo's translation underscore an element that Euripides' play certainly contains, but that interpretations and stagings often tend to ignore: the empathy towards Medea that the dramatic action solicits from the public and which increases exponentially as the play goes

³ As is well-known, nothing certain can be said, based on the sources and witnesses that we possess, about the infanticide committed by Medea before Euripides' tragedy of 431 BCE. There are no decisive arguments that can affirm with any certainty that Euripides innovated the mythological plot by making Medea responsible for the murder of her children, or that he had come across the most suitable variant of the myth, dramaturgically speaking, among the many that existed and had chosen that one. According to one story, Euripides received a monetary recompense from the Corinthians for writing a play attributing the infanticide to Medea and in this way relieved the people of the Isthmian city from the blame (Schol. Eur. *Med.* 264). Besides this, it seems that the poet Eumelus, in his *Corinthiaca* (8th century BCE) related that Medea had in fact killed her children but by mistake during a ritual of regeneration that was supposed to give them eternal life (Paus. II, 3, 11). On the question of the infanticide and on the ways in which it may be realised on the stage see Easterling 1977, Schmidt 1999, Beltrametti 2000, Syropoulos 2001-2002, Sala Rose 2002, Rodighiero 2003, Catenacci 2003.

on – despite the threats of revenge and despite even the infanticide – only evaporating at the conclusion. The spectators are encouraged to feel for the protagonist a “negative empathy”, to use Fusillo’s own well-chosen definition (2022), a sort of unconscious admiration which develops in the face of their condemnation of her thoughts and actions. At certain moments, especially during Medea’s celebrated monologues, if Marinoni’s performance could have been less emphatic and extravagant, more understated, it would have better obtained the effect of emotive harmony.

The staging of *Medea* is always a challenge, almost a risky one, even if at the same time it is fascinating as it allows the director to get to grips with one of the best known and most classical of Western theatrical literature. To put on *Medea* means to confront the staging and interpretation of a complex character with many faces, a figure that has been classified under many labels (the barbarian, the sorceress, the outcast, the refugee, the exile, the avenger, the sly one, the abandoned woman, the violent woman, the wise woman, the shamanic priestess, the witch, the monster or the murderess mother). Each of these labels contains a nugget of truth, but none of them either defines or sums up the whole. A production of *Medea* must not only engage wholly with Euripides but has inevitably to come to terms with a substantial body of traditional rewritings and adaptations in the fields of theatre, narrative and cinema, which have been lodged, more or less deliberately, within the collective memory of our culture. Federico Tiezzi has carried out this task by exploiting both great talent and detailed research, and has kept his balance between respect for dramaturgical and textual dynamics and the right amount both of innovation and of the role of spectacle (I refer in particular to language, lighting and music). The most distinctive interpretative key to this production is the idea suggested by the prologue, that is, that all that happens is simply a dream of the protagonist. This could be considered as a Freudian reading of Euripides’ play that Tiezzi summed up neatly in an interview in the newspaper *La Sicilia* the day before the opening performance (Cartia 2023):

This Colchis is a place where there is no fear of violence nor monsters nor blood, and this place is the unconscious. From here I found a pathway towards the fact that Medea in my head became a case study in which who knows perhaps this woman dreams everything that is happening. Perhaps she dreams of killing her children but she never gets to the actual act that in point of fact in my production is never seen. I decided to have nothing to do with blood spilled by Medea. The barbarian land – this is what Jason calls it – where Medea is born and lives is connected to the Sun as the principle of life, of vital life. It is linked to violence but to the violence of nature. With this action Medea rejects bourgeois civilisation, rejects the civilisation that I have called neocapitalist and is that to which Jason belongs.

The second tragedy staged at the Greek Theatre at Syracuse in 2023 is Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, another essential archetype of ancient myth.⁴ This is, as is well-known, the only complete play to survive of a trilogy performed in Athens in about 460 BCE written by the poet from Eleusis, the rest of which has been lost. The director, Leo Muscato, at his debut at Syracuse, opted for a nebulous, indefinite location at a suspended, far-off time, with a few symbolic props, worn-out by the passing of the years, things that evoke in the spectators' minds an exhausted and unsuccessful technical era. The director explained the reasons for his setting in this way (Muscato 2023, 15-16):

Prometheus Bound is a work that speaks to spectators from all ages as the protagonist embodies the archetypal hero who faces up to the strongest to protect the weakest. He is a father ready to do anything to protect a particularly fragile son. . . . When I began to study the text and to imagine its staging I realised straight away that we should have to chain Prometheus in a metaphorical place to a symbolic rock. Pressing the accelerator on the central theme of human progress, I began to imagine this place as an industrial area abandoned for such a long time that it had become an integral part of the surrounding environment. All is arid and rusty and everything emanates desertion and neglect. The Scythia to which Prometheus is taken is a sort of *finis terrae*, that can only be reached in a goods wagon travelling towards a dead end on a siding.

The rebellious hero, who has dared to oppose Zeus, is nailed down, not to a rock but to a derelict modern chimney, symbol of a now obsolete progress, just as the remains of a factory also appear obsolete (rusty pipes, a ramshackle gate, a cistern, a turbine, a section of railway track, various iron tools) that are scattered around the great orchestra of the Syracuse theatre. The scenography, designed by Federica Parolini, represents mythical Scythia as a dilapidated post-industrial site, even if the railway siding and the truck upon which Kratos and Hephaestus arrive with the hooded and chained Prometheus following

⁴ *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, director Leo Muscato, Italian translation Roberto Vecchioni, dramaturgy Francesco Morosi, scenic project Federica Parolini, costumes Silvia Aymonimo, lighting Alessandro Verazzi, music Ernani Maletta, choir master Francesca Della Monica, choreography Nicole Kehreberge, Assistant director Marialuisa Bafunno, assistant stage designer Anna Varaldo, assistant costume designer Maria Antonietta Lucarelli, stage director Mattia Fontana. Cast Alessandro Albertin (Prometheus), Silvia Valenti (Bia), Davide Paganini (Kratos), Michele Cipriani (Hephaestus), Alfonso Veneroso (Oceanus), Deniz Ozdogan (Io), Pasquale di Filippo (Hermes), Silvia Benvenuto, Letizia Bravi, Gloria Carovana, Maria Laila Fernandez, Valeria Girelli, Elena Polic Greco, Giada Lorusso, María Pilar Pérez Aspa, Silvia Pietta, Giulia Acquasana, Marina La Placa e Alba Sofia Vella (Chorus of Oceanids). *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus directed by Leo Muscato, produced by INDA, had its first performance at the Greek Theatre at Syracuse on the 11th May 2023 and was repeated until 4th June 2023.

them on foot could be said to recall the symbolic imaginary of a concentration camp. The state of abandonment and desolation of the site also brings to mind the context of a nuclear apocalypse like that of Chernobyl (Caggegi 2023). The spectator's feelings will obviously be engaged by this ambience that lends the mythical tale a significance that goes beyond the remote timeline of myth. Alessandro Albertin as Prometheus, bare-chested for the whole performance, nailed like Christ on the cross seven metres above the scene, manages in the most vigorous manner possible to express both the rage and pride of the Titan and his anguish that he can no longer communicate with the human beings who are his protégés and that he no longer knows anything about them (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3 Prometheus (Alessandro Albertin). Photo Ballarino_AFI Siracusa

Bia (Silvia Valenti) is a sadistic jailer dressed in shorts, Kratos (Davide Paganini) looks like a brutal police officer, while Hephaestus (Michele Cipriani), a limping blacksmith-welder in a leather apron and welder's mask with a blowtorch in his hand shows repugnance for what he is about to do. Oceanus (Alfonso Veneroso) seems to be almost a caricature, and Hermes (Pasquale de Filippo), bare-chested under a lame jacket tries to intimidate Prometheus with his skill, but he has to reckon with the tenacious obstinacy of the hero who does not want to reveal to him the danger that is threatening the king of Olympus. However, the fatal secret is revealed to Io (Deniz Özdoğan), the girl Zeus has punished by turning her into a cow that Hera's hatred has caused to wander the world for ever, unable to sleep or eat, while being constantly tormented by horseflies. The scene with Io is without doubt among the most successful. Io's entrance is announced by oriental polyphonic music (Macedonian songs and Berber resonances); then, when the Turkish actress comes on stage, she generates a crazy, anguished character who, as

she moves and expresses herself vocally, adopts animal-like gestures, but in essence, reveals herself to be the most human character in the play (Fig. 4). She is the only one capable of showing empathy to Prometheus, because of the unjust punishment of which she is the victim. Other people who are on the hero's side are the Oceanids, the chorus, who sweep over the stage like waves from an enormous chimney, covered in petrol stains, dressed as fish-women in silver trousers and lightweight black robes with long fishtails.



Fig. 4 Deniz Özdogan as Io. Photo Pantano_AFI Siracusa

This *Prometheus* directed by Muscato is a production of the highest quality and is completely successful in its aim of modernising Aeschylus' tragedy without forcing the original unnecessarily and without exaggeration, amalgamating to perfection images, sounds and words (Roberto Vecchioni, well-known as singer and songwriter, and as a sophisticated intellectual and long-time teacher of classical studies in the Licei, has provided a limpid and agile translation). Above all this *Prometheus* should be recognised as having suggested a distinctive interpretative key which was then developed efficaciously right to the conclusion. The director is questioning himself through Euripides' text about the role of technology in modern society and about its relationship with nature. The foresighted Titan has given fire to human beings and left them the freedom to exploit the technical but "because of some individuals, who founded world economy on their own personal interests, on the accumulation of capital, the technology that should have been used to allow men to live better has devastated nature" (Muscato in Grasso 2023). The hermeneutic perspective that sees in Prometheus a depiction of the necessary rebellion against productivity, consumerism, human alienation, against the subjugation of nature to the logic of exploitation has solid roots in European cultural tradition, starting at

least from Goethe's ode *Prometheus* and passing via Kafka to Heiner Müller.⁵

Before this year, Aeschylus' *Prometheus* had been staged several times at the Greek Theatre at Syracuse, in productions of high artistic level which have passed into history. One needs only to think of Luigi Squarzina's *Prometheus* (1964) in Gennaro Perrotta's translation and with Vittorio Gassman as the enchained hero and Anna Proclemer as Io; or that of 1994 directed by Antonio Calenda, translated by Benedetto Marzullo and interpreted by Roberto Herlitzka and Piera degli Espositi; or again that of Luca Ronconi (2002), translator Dario Del Como, with Franco Brancaroli as Prometheus. Leo Muscato's *Prometheus* is a fitting inheritor of these past events and deserves to be numbered among them.

Translation by Susan Payne

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⁵ See on this particular hermeneutic choice the thoughts of Fornaro 2023.

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