

## The Play *Media* (1875, Kutaisi) on the Georgian Scene: Authorship and Significance for the Contemporary Theatrical Context

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(Presented by Academy Member Rismag Gordeziani)

Having become the nucleus of Georgian culture shortly after its establishment, the Georgian professional theatre proved to be highly influential in shaping the ethical principles of the Georgian public. Out of the Greek tragedies having important place in theatre's repertoire of special note is the play *Medea*, given the significant role this mythic figure played in Georgian people's historical perceptions and collective identity. The author aims to study first production of *Medea* in Georgia, namely the play *Media* directed by Mrs. Ephrosine Kldiashvili, the sole performance of which was staged in Kutaisi in 1875. The surviving information about the event is scarce and, in some cases, inaccurate. To fill the gaps, the research was carried out in two directions: (1) to identify the play after which the production was staged; (2) to study its role in the diversification of the Georgian theatre's repertoire, as well as its impact on women's theatrical activities at the time. The research led to the following conclusions: (1) the performance *Media* was based on the play *Médée* (1855) composed by a French dramatist Ernest Legouve and translated by I. Kereselidze; (2) the performance was an important step towards the diversity of the Georgian theater's repertoire, which at the time was prevailed by comedy. Besides, the production staged by a female director inspired other women as well, encouraging them to overcome the society's moral pressure over their engagement in theatrical life. © 2022 Bull. Georg. Natl. Acad. Sci.

Medea, Georgian theater, reception studies, women directors, Ancient heritage in Georgia

The play *Media* (*Medea*) was first staged in Georgia on 14 April, 1875 in Kutaisi by a prominent representative of Georgian theatre, Ephrosine Kldiashvili. Regrettably, only scarce information – a couple of newspaper articles – survives about this highly remarkable event. Not only the production creators remain unknown (with

the exception of Kldiashvili), but also the play according to which the Kutaisi production was staged.

This author seeks to fill the information gap around the first Georgian theatrical production of *Medea*. She aims, firstly, to identify the play after which Kldiashvili staged the performance and

secondly, if the source play is identified, to determine its place amid the existing contemporary interpretations of Medea's story. Finally, no less important is to establish the place and role of the above production in the Georgian theatre repertoire and in the development of the Georgia's cultural life.

The majority of Georgian theatre historians believe the production was staged according to a play *Medea* by Suvorin and Burenin [1:202; 2:28; 3:14]. However, this assumption is not supported by facts, as the Russian authors completed their play only in 1882 [4]. Therefore, it could not have been the source for Kldiashvili's production back in 1875.

When addressing the issue, the references of the well-known theatrical critic – Grigol Bukhnikashvili seemed to be of the special interest. In one place he writes that Kldiashvili staged the performance according to Ivane Kereselidze's play [5:10], while elsewhere he notes that it was based on Kereselidze's translation [6]. Likewise remarkable is S. Gersamia's handwritten note [7] It mentions Kereselidze's translation of *Media*, published in "Tsiskari" 1863, issue no. 2. "14 April 1875 Kutaisi", which appears below the note, is the date and place of Kldiashvili's production premiere. However, in his published work, Gersamia mentions that the 1875 production of *Media* was based on Suvorin's and Burenin's play [3:14]. Indeed, the mentioned *Tsiskari* issue contains the Georgian text of the play and names Ivane Kereselidze as the translator, which raises the following legitimate question: Why is this fact not mentioned by A. Kaladze who devoted the monography to I. Kereselidze's life and activities, especially so that he focuses on Kereselidze's dramaturgical and translating activities (I. Kereselidze translated from Russian "The Enchanted Prince" and is the author of the plays "Actor", "Fortune-Telling", "Station Overseer", "The Captives of Dagestan", etc.) [8:338].

The next objective of the study was to identify the source text of Kereselidze's translation and its

authorship. However, none of the books or articles examined during the research contained any facts or assumptions that would lead to convincing answers. The specifics of the fabula (plot) of the translated play suggest that the author of the source text must have been the translator's contemporary. Furthermore, Ivane Kereselidze, the editor of *Tsiskari* was known for his interest in Georgian translations of recent literature and publications appearing in Europe. At the time when Kereselidze's translation was published, the most widespread 19<sup>th</sup> century adaptation of *Medea* was Ernest Legouvé's *Médée* composed in 1855, which was immediately translated into Italian and then into English several times [9-11]. The comparison of the French and Georgian texts revealed almost word-for-word correspondence.

At this point, there is yet another question that crops up: from which language was the Georgian translation made? As critics point out Kereselidze's knowledge of Russian and mention his translations from this language [8:338]. It would be legitimate to presume that Legouvé's play could have been translated from Russian. Indeed, after a long search, I found a reference to the Russian translation of Legouvé's *Médée* made in 1860. The reference is preserved in the private library catalogue of a promoter of Italian culture, A. N. Ostrovski [12].

Thus, it is reasonable to argue that the first production of *Medea* to appear on the Georgian stage was based on Ernest Legouvé's play, evidently, translated from French into Russian and then into Georgian by Kereselidze.

Given the limited format of a journal article, findings regarding the significance of the play amid multiple interpretations of *Medea* will be presented concisely.

According to one of the most reputed scholars of the modern adaptations of Greek tragedies, Fiona Macintosh, Legouvé's *Médée* is the most remarkable 19<sup>th</sup> century version of the Greek tragedy after *The Golden Fleece* by Franz Grillparzer (1827) [13:14].

Legouvé's play proved to be highly influential in shaping protofeminist interpretations of *Medea*, which present the female protagonist as victimized by her surroundings. The trend of portraying Medea as a victim is rooted in Grillparzer's above work. This trend however in Grillparzer's tragedy is associated with Medea's being a stranger in Greece. Legouvé's contemporary public expected to see a character whose actions and motivations would be consistent with their own understanding of personal values. Therefore, the fact of maternal filicide was to be depicted somehow as the mother's action committed against her will. These aspirations of public were largely influenced by women's emancipation movements, with which Legouvé evidently sympathized – along with writing, researching of women's issues was among his central pursuits. Legouvé authored several monographs dealing with this question [14, 15].

To present Medea as a victim of circumstances, Legouvé had to make substantial changes to the widely known story. In his play, Medea and Jason arrive in Corinth separately. Medea travels a lot to reunite with her husband and finally comes to Corinth to find Jason already settled and preparing to marry Princess Creusa. Medea did not expect the betrayal. In Legouvé's play, she is even lonelier than her ancient prototype: she does not have even her nurse beside her. Her starving children approach the Princess, Creusa with supplications. Furthermore, Legouvé's Medea finds out about Jason's marriage plans from Creusa. The scene unfolds before the spectators' eyes – Legouvé has the audience witness every step Medea takes on her path to despair. His portrayal of Medea is not one-dimensional: the character is presented as a powerful and proud person who threatens Creusa. On the other hand, she shows feminine weaknesses – despite all, she still loves Jason and implores Creusa on her knees, desperately hoping to have Jason back. Moreover, Legouvé's Medea hates her own evil plans of vengeance on Creusa. She hates being guileful. All these somewhat softens and

transforms the character's traditional vengeful image. Vengefulness is no more the defining feature of her character. What come to the fore are her feminine weaknesses that closely appeal to Legouvé's contemporary audience.

Legouvé's portrayal of Medea as a victim culminates in the finale: her loneliness becomes even more unbearable as her children refuse to accompany her into exile, though she was allowed to take one of them with her. This innovation was introduced into the Medea story by Grillparzer. On his trilogy Medea's revenge is presented as an understandable and almost justifiable outcome of the situation unfolding around Medea [16:392]. This fact deepens her mixed feelings towards them – the feelings that were engendered by Jason's betrayal. "Let them die," she declares in her monologue. However, as soon as she touches her children when they are brought to her to say farewell, her motherly feelings destroy all her filicidal thoughts.

The development of the following scenes makes it evident that the Colchian woman's actions do not depend on her anymore. When outraged Corinthians assault Medea and her children, she seeks shelter in the sanctuary of Saturn and warns her persecutors not to dare to take the boys away from her. But when she sees the wrathful crowd surging forward, she kills her children. This outcome appears to be Medea's only option in her attempt to protect her children from the frantic mob. Thus, in Legouvé's play, filicide committed by Medea is not a predetermined vengeance on her treacherous husband, but a result of the circumstances around her, the circumstances that made Medea a victim.

Given such significance of Legouvé's *Médée*, its translation into Georgian and, furthermore, its staging for the Georgian public must have been a highly remarkable event and can be seen as an attempt of the essential transformation of the repertoire of Kutaisi theatre. As is known, between 1867 and 1879, comedy prevailed on the Georgian

stage, for some objective and subjective reasons [1:202]. Ephrosine Kldiashvili took a brave decision to gather the public not for entertainment but in order to give them food for thought as regards moral ideals and dilemmas. Two newspaper reviews devoted to the Kutaisi production inform us about the character of Kldiashvili's contemporary Georgian theatre repertoire and the outcome of her brave experiment. The author of a review published in the newspaper *Droeba* finds the idea of staging *Media* in Kutaisi highly unsuccessful and 'not deserving compliments'. The reviewer acknowledged the depth of the play, though argued that staging the tragedy for the audience who would only come to the theatre for fun, for a pleasurable experience, was not in the least insightful. *Media* only evokes tears, while the daily life of people in Imereti has enough worries of its own," the reviewer wrote [17].

In her response published in *Droeba* no. 49, Kldiashvili explained that she had intentionally chosen the play on purpose as the audience was bored with the same type of performances. It was an experiment – she wanted to find out if the public was ready to accept plays of different genres. Kldiashvili noted that she observed a shift in public response: *Media* was largely received with empathy. Everyone seemed to be delighted to see the production and admitted to being fed up with comedy plays [18].

Apart from bringing diversity into the Georgian theatre repertoire, Kldiashvili's production proved to be influential in other respects as well. As mentioned above, Legouvé's *Médée* responded to women issues in the author's contemporary

European society. In Georgia, the tragedy was staged by a woman, who also played the protagonist. The fact is highly remarkable given the dominant public stereotypes regarding women's appearance on the stage. Kote Meskhi's article devoted to Kldiashvili sheds light on the issue: "She agreed to take part in Kutaisi performances at the time when no women would agree to go on the stage. In the 60s-70s, many viewed acting on the stage as buffoonery and it was largely avoided" [19].

Likewise, Akaki Tsereteli admits to Georgian women's reluctance to appear on the stage. Along with other reasons, the writer mentions the moral pressure upper class women experienced in this regard. According to Tsereteli, women themselves declared that their own relatives prevented them from going on the stage [20].

Considering the circumstances, Kldiashvili's contribution to Georgian theatre, remarkable as it is, acquires a new dimension, especially at the beginning of her career. According to Kote Meskhi, her example was followed by other women who together with her set up a drama society and offered regular performances to the Kutaisi public. As regards Kldiashvili's production of *Media*, it is to be seen as a major event aimed at encouraging women's active engagement in theatrical, and more broadly, in public and cultural life by overcoming social pressure and stereotypes.

Finally, it is no coincidence that the social and cultural activities of the Georgian female public figure were related to the play *Medea*, as the tragedy resounds with protest against women's social exclusion and victimization.

*მეცნიერების ისტორია*

## „მედიას“ წარმოდგენა ქართულ სცენაზე (1875, ქუთაისი): სპექტაკლის როლი და მნიშვნელობა თანადროულ თეატრალურ კონტექსტში

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(წარმოდგენილია აკადემიის წევრის რ. გორდეზიანის მიერ)

ქართული პროფესიული თეატრი შექმნისთანავე ქართული კულტურის უმნიშვნელოვანეს კერად იქცა, რომელმაც უზარმაზარი როლი ითამაშა ქართული საზოგადოების ეთიკური პრინციპების ჩამოყალიბებაში. ქართული თეატრის რეპერტუარში ანტიკური ტრაგედიები ყოველთვის იკავებდა ღირსესანიშნავ ადგილს. ანტიკურ ტრაგედიასთან შორის საგანგებოდ შეიძლება გამოიყოს ტრაგედია „მედია“ საქართველოს ისტორიისათვის ამ მითოლოგიური ფიგურის მნიშვნელობიდან გამომდინარე. ნაშრომის ავტორის მიზანია შეისწავლოს „მედეას“ პირველი წარმოდგენა ქართულ სცენაზე, კერძოდ, პიესა „მედია“, რომლის დადგმა ჩვენამდე მოღწეული ცნობებით ერთადერთხელ განახორციელა ეფროსინე კლდიაშვილმა 1875 წელს ქუთაისში. ამ წარმოდგენის შესახებ არსებული ცნობები მწირია და, ზოგიერთ შემთხვევაში, არაზუსტი. სპექტაკლის შესახებ არსებული ვაკუუმის შესავსებად კვლევა ჩატარდა ორი მიმართულებით: (1) სპექტაკლის საფუძვლად მდებარე პიესის დასადგენად; (2) წარმოდგენის როლის შესასწავლად, ერთი მხრივ, ქართული თეატრის რეპერტუარის დივერსიფიკაციის საქმეში, და მეორე მხრივ, იმ პერიოდის ქალთა თეატრალურ აქტივობებზე ზემოქმედების კუთხით. კვლევამ შემდეგი დასკვნების გამოტანის საშუალება მოგვცა: (1) წარმოდგენას საფუძვლად უდევს ფრანგი დრამატურგის ერნესტ ლეგუვეს პიესა „მედია“ (1855), რომელიც თარგმნა ივ. კერესელიძემ; (2) სპექტაკლმა თავისი როლი შეასრულა ქართული თეატრის რეპერტუარის გამრავალფეროვნების საქმეში, რომელსაც იმ პერიოდში გამოკვეთილად კომედიური პროფილი ჰქონდა. ამის გარდა, ქალი რეჟისორის მიერ დადგმულმა წარმოდგენამ გაამხნევა სხვა ქალებიც და ითამაშა საგულისხმო როლი იმ მორალური წნეხის გადასალახავად, რომელსაც საზოგადოების მხრიდან თეატრალურ ცხოვრებაში ჩაბმული ქალები განიცდიდნენ.

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