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Medea of Colchis and the Magico-Religious Paradigms of the
Ancient Near East

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Abstract

The present paper aims to provide a complex scholarly investigation into the phenomenon of Medea of Colchis through the dual lenses of Oriental Studies and Comparative Mythology. In this article, the figure of Medea is examined not merely as a character of Classical drama, but as an archetypal carrier of the magico-religious paradigms of the Ancient Near East (Mesopotamian, Hittite, and Egyptian). The relevance of this research is underscored by the fact that Medea represents a cultural "threshold" between Western (Hellenic) rationalism and Eastern exotic mysticism. The study employs an interdisciplinary approach, which allows for the discernment of underlying historical-cultural processes behind the mythological narrative.

The first part of the work provides a detailed analysis of Medea's close affiliation with the cult of the goddess Hecate and the lunar deities of the Near East, focusing on their functional characteristics

and associated ritual practices. Particular attention is devoted to the phenomenon of *pharmaka* (drugs/medicines), which is interpreted in the article as an echo of Ancient Near Eastern medicine, herbal lore, and early alchemy within the Greek epic tradition. The article contends that Medea's magical power is not solely a fairy-tale or literary element; rather, it reflects the empirical knowledge and traditions characteristic of Colchis and the Near Eastern regions—knowledge that was often perceived by the citizens of the Greek polis as an incomprehensible and dangerous force.

The second part of the research is dedicated to the concept of "The Other" within Orientalist discourse. The paper explores how the deliberate demonization of Eastern esoteric knowledge occurred within the Hellenic world and why Medea's "barbarism" became the primary defining feature of her tragic identity. The article substantiates the view that Medea's tragedy is not merely a domestic drama, but the result of an inevitable collision between two distinct cultural, religious, and ethical systems. In this context, Colchis emerges as a potent cultural center and a space of reception, where the transformation of Eastern mystical knowledge took place for its subsequent transmission into the Western intellectual sphere.

The concluding section summarizes the research findings, confirming that the reinterpretation of Medea's persona - when accounting for Near Eastern paradigms - offers a fundamentally new perspective on the interrelationship between Classical Mythology and Oriental Studies. The paper emphasizes that the phenomenon of Medea serves as a key to a more profound understanding of the global cultural interactions within the Ancient World.

Keywords: Medea, Colchis, Oriental Studies, Magico-Religious Paradigms, Orientalism, Hecate, Cultural Identity, Ancient Near East, Pharmacology, Intercultural Dialogue.

Introduction

For centuries, Ancient mythology and Classical literature have served as primary sources for the self-reflection and the formation of the cultural identity of Western civilization. Within this vast and diverse narrative space, the figure of Medea of Colchis emerges as one of the most complex, contradictory, and multilayered archetypes, continuing to provoke intense academic polemics. Through the lens of traditional literary criticism, Medea's persona in Hellenic drama and epic has often been viewed narrowly - as the personification of jealousy, vengeance, and extreme maternal tragedy. However, if we examine the phenomenon of Medea from the perspectives of Oriental Studies, Comparative Religion, and intercultural dialogue, it becomes evident that her character embodies a far deeper and more systemic cultural confrontation than a mere domestic drama.

The relevance and scholarly value of the present work are underscored by the fact that, for the Greek world, Medea was not merely a "foreign" woman or an ordinary migrant from Colchis; she was a living vessel of the magico-religious, astronomical, and medical knowledge of the Ancient Near East (Mesopotamian, Hittite, and Egyptian). Colchis, perceived as a mystical land on the fringes of the then-known civilized world, figured in the Ancient consciousness as a space where human existence and divine (or chthonic) forces merged organically. The demonization of Medea's character in the Hellenic world is directly linked to the cultural fear that the West experienced toward Eastern esoteric knowledge. This process can be elucidated through Edw-

ard Said's fundamental theory of "Orientalism," according to which: "The Orient has always been for the West a mystical, irrational, and dangerous 'Other,' which does not fit within civilized frameworks" (Sa id, 2003:12). In this regard, the "magic" embodied by Medea should not be perceived solely as a fairy-tale element. It is a unique blend of Eastern empirical knowledge, pharmacology, and religious mysticism, which proved entirely unacceptable and transcendental to Hellenic rationalism, with its rigid logical structures. In Euripides' tragedy, Medea's conscious self-identification with this "foreign" and powerful esoteric knowledge is clearly highlighted when she emphatically declares: "...By my nature, I know the power of drugs (pharmaka), and no one can rival me in their preparation..." (Euripides, Medea 395-397). Here, the term pharmaka is inherently ambiguous - it simultaneously signifies medicine and poison, healing and destructive magic, further emphasizing the dualism of Medea's nature.

The primary objective of this work is, through a complex reinterpretation of Medea's image, to demonstrate the robust magico-religious paradigms that link her to the cultural sphere of the Near East. The central hypothesis of our research is that Medea's tragedy is not merely a personal existential failure, but an inevitable collision between two fundamentally different epistemological systems: Western anthropocentric ethics and Eastern theocentric esotericism.

In the subsequent chapters of the article, we will examine in detail Medea's genealogical and functional connection to the cult of the goddess Hecate, which, in turn, is closely linked to the deities of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia. Furthermore, we will analyze the socio-cultural aspects of magical practices and attempt to discern how Greek literature demonized the Oriental "Other" within the framework of Orientalist discourse to protect its own cultural boundaries from foreign influences.

Methodology

The research method employed in the present work, given the specificity and multilayered nature of the subjects of study, is based on the fundamental principles of comparative analysis and hermeneutics. Our starting point is the recognition that Ancient narratives concerning Medea do not represent a static, once-and-for-all given dogmatic reality. On the contrary, these texts are by nature constantly open to the reader, creating a dynamic space for various, often contradictory, interpretations.

The hermeneutic approach allows us, through the in-depth study of individual literary or mythological fragments, to reconstruct and present a unified, holistic picture of the problem. This method is particularly necessary in the study of the Medea phenomenon, as it helps us identify the hidden cultural codes and Eastern paradigms beyond the surface layer of the text that link Medea to the magico-religious traditions of the Near East.

In our research process, special attention is paid to the relationship between the text and its historical-cultural context. Through the analysis of specific parts and episodes, we have attempted to analyze complex issues such as the reception of Eastern esoteric knowledge within the environment of the Greek polis. Based on this interpretive synthesis, the paper aims to formulate appropriate, scientifically argued conclusions regarding the role and significance of Medea as the Oriental "Other" in Ancient discourse.

Discussion

The division between Eastern and Western cultures, as noted in scholarly literature, is not a product of recent centuries; it has accompanied human history since antiquity. This bifurcation is determined less by geographical location than by divergent methods of perceiving the world, systems of traditional values, fundamental worldview ten-

ets, and, naturally, religion. In analyzing our object of interest – Medea of Colchis and the magico-religious paradigms of the Ancient Near East - it is essential to proceed from the dichotomy defined by Samuel Huntington as "The West and the Rest/Others" (Huntington,2003: 25). In this context, for the Hellenic world, Medea is precisely that radical "Other" whose esoteric essence threatens the rational, logocentric structure of the Greek polis.

The Eastern worldview, in contrast to the anthropocentric model of the Greek polis, is built upon a lack of self-isolation from the external world; it focuses on the inner, spiritual life and direct contact with transcendental forces. This type of worldview is characterized by a passive subordination of the human to the natural principle, which is actively sacralized. This is particularly evident in the power of the *pharmaka* possessed by Medea. For Ancient Greece, Medea's knowledge is "foreign" and "dark," yet within the paradigms of the Ancient Near East (Hittite, Mesopotamian), it represents a high-ranking medico-cultic art. Here, we encounter a fundamental misunderstanding: what is a sacred ritual and healing power for Colchian (Eastern) culture is transformed into "barbaric sorcery" for Greek rationalism. This process represents a typical Orientalist approach described by Edward Said, where the West demonizes Eastern knowledge to maintain its own cultural hegemony. As Said notes: "The Orient has always been for the West a mystical, irrational, and dangerous 'Other,' which does not fit within civilized frameworks" (Said, 2003:12).

The knowledge possessed by Medea was not an isolated phenomenon; it coincides with the "ritual landscape" of the Ancient Near East, specifically Hittite Asia Minor. As scholar Walter Burkert points out, Eastern magical practices often relied on complex mechanisms of purification and transformation that were later established in the Greek world (Burkert, 1992:41). Medea's ritual of rejuvenating Aeson,

Jason's father - involving the exchange of blood and the use of herbal infusions - is directly linked to Mesopotamian and Anatolian mythologies of "restoration of life." Here, Medea of Colchis appears not as a charlatan but as a "Divine Artisan" (Demiourgos), who transforms matter through sacred knowledge. This is a paradigm where nature is not an object to be conquered (as in Western rationalism) but a living organism with which dialogue is possible only through magical language.

The episode of Medea's murder of Pelias serves as a classic example of how an Eastern sacred ritual is transformed into a Western criminal act. In the Eastern paradigm, the dismemberment of the body and its subsequent "renewal" (as Medea demonstrated to Pelias' daughters using the ram) is connected to the myth of Osiris and Sumero-Akkadian initiatory practices, where death is perceived as a necessary stage for new life. However, in the context of the Greek polis, Medea used this knowledge not for healing but for political retribution. As scholar Karl Kerényi notes, Medea's magic here loses its original "white" (healing) nature and becomes a weapon against the society that failed to accept her (Kerényi, 1974:263). Here we see the tragic result of a clash of cultures: Medea employs her highest esoteric knowledge (the secret of regeneration) to punish the injustice of the Western world. This is no longer merely a murder; it is a profanation of an Eastern "miracle," which ultimately led to the complete demonization of Medea in Ancient literature.

Simultaneously, in analyzing the phenomenon of Medea, one cannot bypass the symbolic geography attributed to Colchis in the Ancient consciousness. Colchis was not merely a territorial unit; it represented the "Domain of the Sun," where the "Golden Fleece" - the supreme symbol of Eastern esoteric knowledge and royal authority - was kept. Consequently, Medea's assistance to Jason and her participation in the theft of the Fleece can be viewed, from a hermeneutic

perspective, as an overflow of Eastern sacred energy into the West, for which the Greek world was unprepared. The Western worldview, which prioritizes pragmatism and utilitarianism, attempted to utilize Medea's "Eastern mysticism" solely for its own ends; however, as soon as the political necessity vanished, the Hellenic polis perceived Medea's magical paradigm as a threat. This is a manifestation of cultural egoism that regards the "Other" only as a functional instrument and denies their spiritual authenticity.

In the realm of symbolic geography, the phenomenon of the Golden Fleece deepens further when considered in relation to the Hittite *kurša* (sacred skin), a symbol of prosperity and divine protection. According to Rismag Gordeziani, in the context of Colchian and Asia Minor cultural relations, the Fleece represented not only material wealth but also an object carrying royal charisma (*Hvarena*) (Gordeziani, 1999:78). Accordingly, Medea's handing over of the Fleece to Jason was not a simple betrayal; it was a voluntary transfer of sacred energy from one cultural space to another. For the Greek side, this was "booty," while for the Eastern paradigm, it was a violation of the world order (*Cosmos*), which subsequently led to inevitable tragedy.

The magico-religious nature of Medea of Colchis is most extensively presented in Apollonius of Rhodes. In the *Argonautica*, Medea appears not simply as a woman in love, but as a priestess of Hecate who possesses the "drug of Prometheus" and commands chthonic forces. In the third book of the poem, the author describes Medea's mystical ritual, where she summons the goddess of the underworld in the dead of night, highlighting her connection to the esoteric traditions of the Ancient Near East (Apollonius of Rhodes, 1970:158). This confirms that her power originates from secret rituals that were inaccessible and dangerous to the Hellenic world.

Medea's connection with Hecate and her nocturnal rituals can be interpreted as an initiatory process. According to Mircea Eliade's theory, Eastern mysticism often involves a "return to the origins," a submersion into chaos to establish a new order (Eliade, 1958:112). When Medea uses the "drug of Prometheus" (which sprouted from the Titan's blood), she unites the subterranean (chthonic) and celestial (Promethean) principles. This synthesis was incomprehensible to Hellenic religion, as Greek Olympian religion strictly demarcated celestial deities from the forces of the underworld. Medea, however, is a transgressor of these boundaries, making her a "liminal" figure who belongs to two worlds simultaneously and to neither fully.

Interestingly, the figure of Medea embodies the principle of the "inner gaze" characteristic of Eastern mysticism. Her connection with the goddess Hecate - a chthonic, nocturnal, and liminal deity - points to Medea's role as a mediator between the visible and invisible worlds. While the Western worldview aims for human awareness of the external world and active pragmatic influence upon it, the Medean Eastern paradigm values silence, self-absorption, and ritual conservatism. Medea's tragedy is precisely the collision of these two epistemological systems: Jason's pragmatic calculations clash with Medea's metaphysical fidelity to archaic oaths and magical laws. In this light, Medea's sacrifice of her children can be viewed not as an emotional affect, but as a terrifying, religious act - a final return to her Eastern, chthonic roots and a total rejection of Western social constructs.

Furthermore, the transformation of Medea's social status as an Eastern woman must be emphasized. In the magico-religious systems of the Ancient Near East, female authority was often sacralized, and she possessed "sacred power," which proved entirely unacceptable to the patriarchal Greek polis. In Hellenic discourse, Medea's intelligence and magical skills were perceived not as wisdom but as "guile" and

"dangerous power," further intensifying her demonization. Medea's alienation in Corinth was not merely ethnic; it was the collapse of the magico-religious hierarchy in which she existed in Colchis. When, in Euripides, Medea declares her superiority in the knowledge of drugs, she is actually defending her Eastern identity against attempts at Western "domestication."

Medea's sacrifice of her own children in Euripides' tragedy is the most radical point. While from a Western, psychological perspective, this is perceived as a collapse of maternal instinct and revenge against Jason, from a religious-anthropological viewpoint, it carries a different weight. In the magico-religious systems of the Ancient Near East (for instance, in Phoenician or early Semitic cults), the sacrifice of one's firstborn was an act of supreme religious devotion aimed at restoring cosmic balance. Medea, a descendant of the sun god Helios, severs her last biological and social ties with the Hellenic world by killing her children. This is her "return" to archaic, chthonic origins. In Mircea Eliade's terminology, this is an "exit from historical time" and a return to mythological eternity (Eliade, 1963:145). Medea does not kill her children only to punish Jason; she kills them to prevent their "domestication" and assimilation into a culture that is spiritually dead to her. The finale, where Medea ascends to the heavens in the chariot of the Sun, confirms her metaphysical victory: she is no longer subject to human justice; she returns to the divine-magical hierarchy of which she was a member while in Colchis.

Such cultural duality and the sorrow of alienation that follows Medea are not foreign to Georgian academic discourse. Medea's status as the "Other" in the polis finds a parallel in Konstantine Gamsakhurdia's vision, where the West demands a complete transformation of identity from the "Other": "You Europeans are egoists; you demand that we transform... that is, become like you" (Gamsakhurdia, 1973:

143). In Medea's case as well, Hellenic society demanded that she renounce her "barbaric" magic and conform to Greek norms, which ultimately caused her internal collapse and radical protest.

Thus, the phenomenon of Medea reminds us that the difference between cultures never disappears; it only intensifies when Western rationalism and Eastern mysticism meet. Being a "talentless copy of the Other" is unacceptable to Medea; therefore, her image remains a constant warning about the cultural crises that accompany the dialogue of civilizations. Medea of Colchis remains the most tragic figure standing at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, through whom we can perceive the difficult path of reception and subsequent transformation of the magico-religious paradigms of the Ancient Near East.

Conclusion

Based on the research conducted, which relied on the methods of comparative analysis and hermeneutics, several fundamental conclusions can be formulated regarding the interrelationship between the phenomenon of Medea of Colchis and the magico-religious paradigms of the Ancient Near East:

Cultural Dichotomy and the Archetype of "The Other": It has been confirmed that the figure of Medea in Ancient discourse is not merely a literary character; she is a quintessential representation of the "Oriental Other." Hellenic rationalism perceived Medea not as an authentic bearer of Colchian culture, but as a threat to the social and ethical order of the polis.

Reception of Magico-Religious Paradigms: The pharmaka possessed by Medea and her connection to Hecate represent the transformation of Ancient Near Eastern (Hittite, Mesopotamian) esoteric knowledge within the Greek sphere. What was a sacred, ritual science in the East became demonized as "sorcery" in the West - a direct consequence of the Orientalist gaze.

The research has revealed an intriguing parallel between Medea's name and her functional significance. The name "Medea" (Medeia), which in Greek is linked to "care," "plan," or "contrivance" (medomai), acquires the meanings of "healer" and "knower" within an Eastern context (from which the modern term "medicine" also originates). This fact further confirms that Medea was not merely a mythological persona but embodied a Colchian intellectual-magical tradition. Her phenomenon demonstrates that in the Ancient Near East, knowledge (whether magical or medical) was a source of power, which the Western world sought to "steal" (in the form of the Fleece) and subsequently "domesticate." Medea's tragedy is precisely the process of the alienation of this "knowledge" - when science and magic, which coexisted harmoniously in the East, became polarized within Greek rationalism.

Identity Crisis and Duality: Medea's tragedy is the result of a collision between two distinct epistemological systems. The study has shown that Medea's internal duality was caused by the aggressive demand for assimilation from the Western world. Medea's refusal to be a "talentless copy of the Other" and her return to archaic, magical roots constitute a radical act of preserving cultural identity.

The analysis has demonstrated that Medea represents a so-called Liminal figure—a being who constantly exists on the threshold: between East and West, between the chthonic (subterranean) and the Olympian (celestial), and between the barbaric and civilized worlds. This "mediation" grants her unique power but simultaneously makes her vulnerable within both systems. To Colchis, she is a "traitor"; to Greece, she is a "foreigner." Thus, Medea's pronounced loneliness in Corinth is not merely social isolation; it is the metaphysical fate of an individual who attempted a synthesis of two radically different relig-

ious paradigms, which proved impossible at that stage of civilizational development.

Particular attention must be paid to the transcendental nature of Medea's figure, which surpasses ordinary human ethics and links directly to the sacred-ritual logic of the Ancient Near East. The research process highlighted that Medea's actions, which constitute criminal acts under the rational law of the Greek polis, are perceived within the framework of the Eastern magical paradigm as a terrifying yet necessary ritual for restoring cosmic balance. Medea is not merely a woman consumed by vengeance; she is the guardian of Oriental "sacred knowledge," for whom archaic oaths and divine laws stand higher than Western social constructs. Her metamorphosis at the end of the tragedy - ascending to the heavens in the chariot of the Sun - symbolically personifies the ultimate victory of the Eastern spirit over Western earthly pragmatism and her refusal to return to a world that could not tolerate her.

In conclusion, it should be noted that the study of Medea's persona helps us re-evaluate the very concept of "civilization." While the Western tradition finds civilization in rationalism and adherence to law, the Medean Eastern paradigm reminds us of another, deeper layer of civilization - the ritual connection with nature and metaphysical responsibility. Medea's flight in the sun chariot is not an escape but transcendence - a testament to the fact that Eastern spiritual energy cannot be imprisoned within narrow political or social frameworks.

Thus, the reinterpretation of the Medea phenomenon through the prism of modern Oriental Studies and Culturology acquires particular relevance. Medea remains a symbol that cultural identity and the magico-religious paradigms of the Ancient Near East are not static givens, but a living, dynamic process that continues to pose relevant questions about the dialogue of civilizations today. Our research sho-

ws that encoded within the figure of Medea is the historical memory of Colchis as a potent cultural bridge between East and West. This figure reminds us that understanding and accepting the "Other" requires not their transformation into a copy of oneself, but the recognition of their authentic, albeit "foreign" and mystical nature - a realization that gains decisive importance in today's multicultural world.

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