

THE WOMAN IN THE MIRROR OF TIME: THE MYTH OF FEDRA

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Abstract: The paper entitled The Woman in the Mirror of Time: The Myth of Phaedra analyzes character representation in the tragedies of Euripides, Seneca, and Miguel de Unamuno, highlighting the innovations brought about by demythification and the change of vision on woman. The various types of plot (divine, human, interior) change the characters' tragic relationship with the world (moral convention, the aesthetics of existence, genuine feeling) and with their own selves. The heroine's original sin becomes an error of judgment and "redeemable failure", and in the evolution of the myth's transfiguration the woman is invested with heightened dignity, recovering her generic innocence in relation with the other gender.

Key-words: Phaedra, Greek, Latin, modern, guilt, plot

Officially, the Greek classical world is the world of the Olympian gods, ruled by Zeus. Under their rule, the tense thread of each human race silently weaves the destiny of every mortal out of clouds, darkness and pain. Exalted by virtue, man's soul is alienated by desire, turned into hubris, a form of freedom which becomes useless when faced with the transcendent necessity; a victim of hubris, man knows full well the moral value of good, but he can no longer achieve it, while beauty, with its many facets, no longer feeds man wisdom. This is all because man is the battlefield and the alibi of the gods, who guard the border of life and death, changing from above reason into insanity, hope into sin, and the future into fatal past. This consciously painful struggle man fights with his own destiny, projected by the gods in tragic situations, brings to the foreground the catastrophe, the self-suppression with a view to recovering the identity and values that defined man in his the world.

That world of Greek humanism, summarized in the phrase of Protagoras (487-420 BC): “Man is the measure of all things, both of those who exist as they do, and of those who do not exist, as they do not” was governed by *kalokagathia*, the ideal of physical beauty harmonized with the moral virtues, of the indissoluble union between the good and the beautiful, between ethics and aesthetics. Under the influence of this philosopher who was his contemporary, Euripides (480-404 BC) modernized Greek tragedy thematically, granting women and femininity a greater role in the dramatic action for the first time in the misogynistic society of his day, debunking the mythical figures in the pantheon and giving human feelings a significant share in establishing moral responsibilities, that reside in a nobler conception of man. The heroes and heroines, genuine carriers of virtues, become models of a spiritualized humanity, able to move the audience precisely because Euripides shows people as they are, as Aristotle noted critically in his *Poetics*¹.

In its dramatic simplicity, the tragedy *Hippolytus*² reveals a radical truth about the relationship between man and gods: the essence of the world of mortals is death, so straying away/trespassing is the natural state and the only one which may eventually attract mercy. Exiled to atone for his crimes, standing between the statues of Aphrodite and Artemis (the two irreducible opponents), Theseus looks towards the land of his city; once there, next to the corpses of his noble wife, Phaedra, and of his loving son, Hippolytus, of the latter’s death he is responsible, he wishes he hadn’t returned at all. A mediator of the will of the gods, located outside the confrontation of several tragic destinies, the presence of Theseus, purified and absolved of any guilt, emphasizes the initiatory character of this Olympian truth, by the symbolic symmetry of beginning and end.

But the unfolding of the action also integrates a subversively Dionysian story that challenges both man’s relationship with the Olympian gods, his relationship with others and with himself, as well as his immutable destiny, a destiny dominated by fatality, by the “transcendent

¹ Aristotle, *Poetica*, Introductory study, translation and comments by D. M. Pippidi, Editura Academiei R. P. R, București, 1965, XXV 1460b30.

² In vol. Euripides, *Electra*, Translation, preface and notes by Alexandru Miran, Editura Minerva, București, 1976.

necessity”³, opposing them to a multiple and mobile identity of metamorphosis. It so happens that Euripides ties the knot of the dramatic conflict to the initiation into the Eleusinian Mysteries (of the chthonian gods Demeter-Persephone-Dionysus), when faithful Phaedra saw her “Orphic” stepson, the hunter Hippolytus, and fell in love with him. From the hill on which Theseus stands, it seems that not only Aphrodite’s hatred and revenge spelt doom for the mortals, but also Artemis’s indifference to her protégés, temporarily forgetful about their duties to her. From the Eleusinian Temple, it appears that Hippolytus’s anti-heroic life is death while Phaedra’s serene joy is merely half-living, an incomplete form in the absence of suffering. Eventually, the outcome of the play seems to be the lesson offered by the twice-born-and-raised-from-the-dead god, Dionysus, about taking full responsibility for all hypostases of existence as a masculine hero, as was the case with right and pious Hippolytus, always content to be second into the city, free of any responsibility, as well as for the hypostases of that exultant life of femininity, by assumed love, beyond the limits of duty and unconcealed by lies. As such, his mythical scenario demonstrates that it is not death (that can be defeated), or sin (that can be forgiven), which separates man from God and victim from hero, but submission.

The drama of the tragic situation resides in that the author offers a plural perspective, a doubling of conflicts: in order to suggest them, Euripides resorts to parallelism and symmetry in outlining the characters’ destinies, as they are meant to never meet, to always live separately. In this subtle interplay of appearance and calm, absence and silence, divine order and human laws, this fragmentary knowledge of love (offered by the will of the enemy goddesses), non-empirical for Hippolytus and sensory for Phaedra, becomes an instrument of action for death; once the filter of personality-building values (honor, virtue, piety, beauty and wisdom) denies everything that lies beneath it, it acts as illness and insanity deep into one’s being unreality, ultimately leading to laceration of the soul and death.

Learning from the Nurse about his step mother’s love, Hippolytus cries out his hatred of all women, particularly of the beautiful and smart ones, whom he would love to continuously trample under his feet, as they are nothing but “scourges” for men; in a cruel and ironic twist of

³ Goya, Losada José Manuel, *Fedra y los dioses (Eurípides, Racine, Unamuno)*, in „Thélème. Revista Complutense de Estudios Franceses”, Madrid, 2011, vol. 26, <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/THEL/article/viewFile/36769/35601>.

fate, Hippolytus dies in a manner befitting the aggressive exertion of his masculinity, trampled under the hooves of his horses. Beyond the veils of convention presupposed by a dutiful life in the service of husband and children, Phaedra discovers the force of her own femininity which, once confessed publicly, would make her life a “target for everyone’s contempt” (*own translation*).

Refusing to meet him and talk to him, Phaedra silently defends her dignity before gods and fellow mortals, whose hatred and indifference she defies, in an unprecedented gesture of liberation: the letter in which she denounces a lie with another lie, accusing her innocent stepson of incest, thus attracting his father’s anger and the death-mongering wrath of Poseidon. Death is the only force that calms down Neptune’s wrath, Aphrodite’s frustration, and Artemis’s passiveness, whose speech at the end of the tragedy exemplifies the typical hypostasis in the man-god relationship – man has always been *the innocent culprit*. Artemis discloses to Theseus the divine truth in the form of three paradoxes, revealing the destiny of the three characters involved in the drama: the forgiveness granted for his twofold, ignorance-induced guilt towards Hippolytus and Phaedra, the innocence that destroyed Hippolytus, and the nobility with which Phaedra endured the “reckless passion” inflicted upon her by a rivalry between goddesses. This paradox also explains the irrational dimension that man suddenly discovers in his own life, which he refuses, unable to fight it otherwise, since its divine force is far beyond him and becomes a source of man’s tragic destiny and of transfiguration of life as scenic illusion.

Centuries later, Seneca (4 BC - 65 AD) will revive the myth in his own tragedy *Phaedra*⁴. The most significant tragedian between the classical Greeks and the Elizabethans was a true innovator of tragedy by the use of artistic ideas and meanings, bringing it one step closer to the array of problems and art of modern man, by creating a philosophical and poetic form of theatre, more literary than theatrical within a non-classical framework⁵. Seneca organizes his dramatic conflicts along the coordinates of moral stoic philosophy, highlighting the dynamic of tragic passions placed in antithesis with reason, which is supposed to govern man’s life in keeping with nature’s laws. Seneca interiorizes action, putting an emphasis not on the situation, but on the

⁴ In Seneca, *Tragedii*, vol. I, Introductory study, translation, notes and commentaries by Traian Diaconescu, Editura Univers, București, 1979.

⁵ Diaconescu, Traian, *Seneca și renovarea tragediei antice*, in Seneca, *Tragedii*, vol. I, Introductory study, translation, notes and commentaries by Traian Diaconescu, Editura Univers, București, 1979.

protagonist's character, and deepening the psychological analysis by the use of pathetic monologue, which discloses the larger-than-nature force of invading sentiment. This kind of monologue imbues his discourse with lyricism, while the inner scene of sublime feelings is amplified by the choir's interventions, which suggest the atmosphere of the action, dominated by the woman's personality.

While Euripides's heroine leaves this world denying Hippolytus one last encounter, incriminating by her final gesture the conventions and prejudices that condition the unhappy fate of her fellow-women, held captive in the *thalamus* of their husbands' house, Seneca's Phaedra is a more liberal woman, since the author [de]localizes the Greek myth, recreating it for the Romans of his day, where aristocratic ladies had become emancipated from masculine authority and enjoyed full patrimonial and judicial independence⁶. Her freedom in relation to necessity becomes manifest in the very liberty she takes when speaking openly and relativizing overtly the moral values of her age. Seneca affords brightness and force to the blind passion that triumphs in his heroine's soul, while Theseus journeyed into the Inferno, with no chance of ever coming back, thus releasing Phaedra from the blemish of sin and divine fatality: „*Eu port în piept regatul lui Amor cel năvalnic/ Și nu mă tem de-ntoarceri; căci niciodată omul/ Alunecând în hăuri, pășind în casa mută,/ În noaptea fără margini, n-a mai zărit lumină.*”⁷Roman Phaedra embraces love unconditionally, preserving her moral perception upon the world down to the bitter end; faced with Theseus's return, she contemplates with lucidity woman's position into a man's world, whose hypocrisy and cruelty she challenges: „*Târzie ni-i rușinea,/ Poate-oi ascunde crima sub torță legitimă./ Succesele adesea preschimbă crima-n cinste.*” „*Noi ne-am unit destinul. Să pieri, dacă ești castă,/ Pentru bărbat, iar dacă incestă ești, tu piere/ Pentru amant. Cum altfel să mai iubesc eu soțul?/ Nu pot să gust iubirea prin crimă răzbunată.*” Her stake is not the respect for convention but the rediscovery of heroic masculine beauty, a process which becomes the fictional plot of the text; the very pure image of her stepson is the idealized image of the man Phaedra once fell in love with when young: „*Așa e Hippolytus: mi-e drag încă Theseus/ Precum odinioară când el era mai tânăr/ și fragede tuleie îi adumbreau obrazul,/ Când a văzut palatul întunecat din Cnossos/ Și-a dezlegat cu firul întortocheata cale./ Cum scânteia*

⁶ Gramatopol, Mihai, *Femeia în societatea romană antică*, <https://ro.scribd.com/doc/77344220/Femeia-in-societatea-roman%C4%83-antic%C4%83>.

⁷ p. 155.

*atunci! Bentițe-i țineau chica,/ Sfiala purpurie mijea pe chipu-i fraged/ și mușchii săi puternici
jucau pe brațul tânăr./ Asemenea Dianei la chip sau lui Apollo,/ Sau mai degrabă ție, așa a fost
Theseus/ Când a plăcut dușmancei.”răzbunată.”⁸ The importance of this theme is highlighted
once more when it is rejoined during the mourning over the mangled body, which signifies the
irretrievable loss of beauty as understood by the heroine, the Herald, and the Choir, signaling too
the distancing from the motivation in Euripides’s tragedy, which has more to do with the cult of
gods and the taboos associated with them.*

With Seneca, Phaedra and Hippolytus enjoy a moral liberty that Euripides’s characters
could only suspect to exist. The confrontation between characters becomes the essence of
dramatic tension, while the myth – a desacralized poetic form by which the poet discloses the
hidden meaning of the characters’ attitudes; in Seneca’s tragedy, as it were, allusions to other
myths or reference to them, such as the Golden Age, the Cave, Phaeton, are meant as strategies
that allegorically crystalize the choices, experiences, destinies and moral judgments of the heroes
from the arch-myth. Hippolytus, skilled hunter of wild beasts, extols natural freedom, far away
from the city, criticizing the various forms of inflicting death invented by human civilization; the
pride with which he lives his alterity with regard to humanity and femininity turns him into a
wild misanthrope, blinded by prejudices; Seneca’s discourse flows harmoniously, abounding in
images of unprecedented beauty in Latin theatre, mirrored in the Romanian translation by
eminent classicist Traian Diaconescu, which adapts the original meter with a freshness, variety
and precision that display the rare quality of reviving the passionate inner climate of the
protagonists for the modern reader: „*Mai liberă nu-i alta nici fără de prihană,/ Nici să cultive
ritul străbunilor întocmai/ Cu viața dusă-n crânguri departe de cetate/ [...] Așa trăiau odată/
Străbunii primei vârste împreunați cu zeii./ Nici patima cea oarbă de aur n-au știut-o/ Și nici o
piatră sacră, hotar între popoare,/ N-a împărțit câmpia și luntrea temerară/ Nu despicasе valuri,
căci fiecare-atuncea/ Doar marea sa văzuse.” „Nu mai vorbesc de mașteri. Sunt fiarele mai
blânde./ Regina fărdelegii rămas-a tot femeia:/ În crime iscusită, ea cucerește inimi,/ Prin
adulter aprinde cetăți și gloate-n luptă/ Și-n lut răstoarnă regii și spulberă popoare./ Nu
amintesc de alta. Medeea lui Aegeus./ Ea singură ne-ar face ca să urâm femeia [...] Eu le detest,*

⁸ p. 168, 189, 170.

le blestem și fug, mă înspăimântă./ Din cuget sau din fire sau din mânie oarbă/ Eu le urăsc și-mi place.”⁹

Phaedra’s modest, sensitive, but passionate soul burns on love’s pyre, reaching the sublime through commitment and self-sacrifice: *„Iubirea învăltorată arde/ Pieptu-mi nebun. Sălbatic ea fierbe-n mădule/ Până-n adânc și curge în clocot prin viscere./ Vălvori aleargă-n trupu-mi și tănuite patimi/ Precum flămânde flăcări pe falnice tavane.”* The verses full of freshness and authenticity convey the entire inner tension, transposed into the aphoristic concentration of thought: *„Îmi știu ursita casei și sufletu-mi iubește/ Ce trebuie s-alunge. Dar eu nu-mi sunt stăpână./ Ah, te-oi urma, nebună, prin flăcări sau pe mare,/ Prin munți sau peste fluvii cu undele în volburi:/ Oriunde tu vei merge, te voi urma-n neștire./ Iată-mă iar, trufașe, marunc lângă genunchi-ți.”¹⁰*

The ambiguous complexity of her feelings and of her status as wife, widow, step mother and woman intermingle with the ambiguity of Hippolytus’s language, as he sets his symbolic trap challenging her to confess to her ill-fated love: *„Zei cei dreپți desigur vor face să revină./ Dar cât vor ține-nchisă în negură speranța,/ Eu ocroti-voi frații cei dragi cu pietate,/ Te voi păzi cu grijă să nu te simți vădană./ Eu însumi pentru tine voi ține locul tatei.”¹¹* Begging him for mercy, and completely transfigured by the love she feels, the woman offers him dominion over her heart and over the princeless city. But the hunter of wild beasts suppresses the fragile hope in her bosom, leaving behind only a sword that will symbolically pierce Phaedra’s body: her suicide stands for a dignified reassertion of her femininity, although her body will end up crushed under the dust thrown over her grave by her returned husband, the former seducer of her sister, Ariadne: *„Eu am înfrânt ispita. Nici fierul nici cuvântul/ Nu mi-au clintit voința. Trupul învinse chinul,/ Dar sângele-mi spăși-va pudoarea mea pătată.”¹²*

Almost nineteen centuries later, Miguel de Unamuno (1864-1936), a distinguished representative of Spanish existentialism, was to re-stage this myth in the tragedy *Fedra*¹³ which,

⁹ p. 164, 166.

¹⁰ p. 170, 172.

¹¹ p. 169.

¹² p. 180.

¹³ Unamuno, Miguel de, *Fedra, tragedie în trei acte*, Spanish-Romanian bilingual edition, Translation and note on the edition by Diana Maria Diaconescu, Preface by Andrei Ionescu, Afterword by Dana Diaconu, Editura Ars Longa, Iași, 2011. This bilingual philological edition made by Diana Maria Diaconescu, one century after the writing of the original, displays the talent and ability of putting together a translation both *ad verbum* and *ad sensum*, that offers an invaluable scientific instrument in the reception of literature from a comparative perspective, while the

80 years after its author's death, still retains unchanged its truth and aesthetic vigor. Like Seneca, Unamuno creates a poetic and philosophical theatre, laying his account on the characters' interior richness, although his professed model is Euripides, an exponent of "tragic purity", with whom he shares the desire to create a "tragedy in all its august and solemn greatness" (*own translation*). His introductory text, published in 1918, sheds light on the author's intention to renew modern dramatic art, by the return *ad fontes*; he opposes his vision of the theatre to the modern vision, starting from the idea that "There is an ongoing conflict between dramatic art and theatrical art, between literature and scenic representation"¹⁴ (*own translation*). Anti-rhetorical and minimalistic, Unamuno frees his creation from literary "trinkets" (transitional episodes meant to entertain the audience, showy characters, rhetorical dialogues and monologues), as well as from scenic ones (scenery and costumes), doing away with the tricks of pathetic acting, and even simplifying ("denuding") the Greek model of "tragedy as poetic work".

Unamuno lives up to the challenge, but reinterprets the means of the above-mentioned model, which he makes modern: although he stages the same subject, his characters belong to modern times, being, "on top of it all, Christian" (*own translation*). The "pure tragic" that the playwright speaks about amounts to the lived experience of eternal passions with an intensity that discloses the characters' humanity and moral loftiness, expressed by simple means, capable of communicating the "poetic nudity of tragedy". In the composition of his drama, Unamuno reduces the number of characters, leaves out the narrative or deliberative interventions of the Choir, and simplifies the action, since the action is psychologically interiorized, not brought about and resolved by exterior forces (*deus ex machina*); from the Greek myth, he only keeps the essence, exemplified by those characters with a tragic stature, Fedra and Hipólito, the other characters being only functional projections of the ancient characters¹⁵, while the dramatic concentration of the play is due to the direct character of the confrontation of passions.

According to Aristotle, tragedy is, first and foremost, "poetry", because it employs the verse form and the high style, which makes the expression of pathos undergo some form of

recovery of this masterpiece of Hispanic literature in the Romanian cultural space bespeaks, as the author writes, the unity of European culture.

¹⁴*Ibidem*, p. 13.

¹⁵ In Unamuno's play, there are six characters: Fedra, Hipólito, Pedro (father to Hipólito and husband to Fedra), Eustaquia (the Nurse), Marcello (a Doctor, a friend of Pedro's), and Rosa (the Servant). In Euripides there were Aphrodite, Artemis, Phaedra, Hippolytus, Theseus, two heralds, servants, and the Women's Choir.

mediation and the fall of characters display some sense of serenity. Seneca eloquently expresses suffering through language, varying the expressive registers of speech, in images full of force and significance, which distances his metaphorical, vigorous and sententious discourse from the classical standards: thus, he can put switch emphasis from the external (divine) causality of the dramatic situation to the human motivation, demythifying the Greek model. Unamuno explores the poetic dimension of passion which manifests itself with elemental force, but he also “denudes” the language, removing images, and puts his trust in the concision, concreteness and naturalness of everyday speech, of the colloquial style; to him, poetry is beyond all words; it is impossible to represent, incommunicable, and mysterious, just like the depths that beget the experience of the sublime, so terrifying in its radicalness and integral involvement that it resembles death: “What I tried to do is poetry, not dramatic oratory. And it seems to me that striving after a poetic theatre means just this, not writing one rhyme after another which, most of the time, is mere rhyming eloquence, and usually not even this much”¹⁶. (*own translation*)

Unamuno’s Fedra possesses a soul that is breathing an air of fatality too, but her will is no longer controlled by the ancient gods; her will is self-centered, for she does not attempt to restore universal balance by virtue of transcendental values, but her inner order, the path towards her moral destiny, which also brings into focus the play’s Christian meaning, that human existence must be transfigured by suffering: “The most innocent ears have to hear, indeed they can hear, the cries of a fateful, irresistible passion; what they are by no means supposed to hear is the cunning of hypocritical sensuality, or the shamelessness of vice”, the author wrote in the introduction¹⁷. (*own translation*)

Euripides’s Phaedra takes her secret to the grave, Seneca’s Phaedra bashfully discloses it to be related to beauty, but Unamuno’s Fedra turns her confession into an act of faith, truly visionary for the whole humanity, as testified by the play’s last three lines: „*Pedro: Până la urmă, a fost o sfântă martiră! A știut să moară! Hipólito: Să știm să trăim, tată! Eustaquia: Avea dreptate, a fost destinul!*”¹⁸. By the choice she makes, she restores harmony to her family, between father and son, and facilitates their ability to take responsibilities for the Other.

¹⁶*Ibidem*, p. 17.

¹⁷*Ibidem*, p. 19.

¹⁸*Ibidem*, p. 153.

Different from her ancient counterparts, she does not die full of self-hate or accusing her fallen husband, but stating plainly the truth of love, made eternal by the cold touch of death.

Vitality and the “tragic feeling of life” are conjugated in the “agonistic” philosophy, formulated in Unamuno’s essays and in *The Agony of Christianity*: “Agony, *αγωνία*, means struggle. He who lives struggling agonizes; struggling against life itself. And struggling against death. This is the very meaning of the famous adage by St Theresa de Avila: ‘I am dying because I am not dying’. What I am going to tell you about here, dear reader, is my agony, my Christian struggle, the agony of Christianity in me, its death and resurrection in every moment of my intimate life [...] Life is a struggle, and solidarity towards life is struggle too, and it manifests itself through struggle. I shall never tire to repeat that what unites people the most is their discords. And what unites man most with himself, and creates the intimate unity of our life, is our intimate discords, the inner contradictions of our discords. One makes peace with himself, just like Don Quixote, only to die. [...] The entire human effort consists in giving history a human finality; a superhuman finality, as Nietzsche would have it, as one who dreamed of such an absurdity called social Christianity”¹⁹. (*own translation*)

The stake of this permanent turmoil is the finding of truth accompanied by spiritual enlightenment: “Any Christian, in order to bear witness to his Christianity, to his Christian agony, must say about himself: *Ecce christianus*, just like Pilate said: ‘*Ecce homo!* (Behold the man!)’. He must put his Christian soul on display, the soul he forged in battle, through his agony as a Christian. For man is not born with a soul, he dies with one – and only after he has forged one for himself”²⁰. (*own translation*)

This “tragic feeling of life”²¹ appears in Fedra’s mind when she invokes Our Lady of Sorrows and Her Holy Son (III, 1), and turned Christian, it becomes a “recoverable failure” which makes reconciliation and salvation possible; this feeling is engraved in man’s intimate nature, in his dual structure, both spiritual and material, which makes him perpetually vacillate between two attitudes, belief and doubt. The theme of struggle appears in the first scene of Act

¹⁹ Unamuno, Miguel de, *Agonia creștinismului*, Translation and preface by Radu Petrescu, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 1993.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Unamuno, Miguel de, *Despre sentimentul tragic al vieții la oameni și la popoare*, Translation by Constantin Moise, Preface by Dana Diaconu, Editura Institutul European, Iași, 1995.

One, together with the theme of the Eros – Thanatos identity, suggested by the ambivalent symbol of the kiss: „*Fedra: [...] De această mamă pe care abia dacă am cunoscut-o. Mi se pare că simt pe buzele mele sărutul ei, un sărut de foc în lacrimi pe când aveam... nu știu... doi ani, unul și jumătate, unul, poate chiar mai puțin... Ca o imagine deslușită prin ceață. [...] Spune-mi: și ea a luptat? [...] Adică, da, a luptat. Și, spune-mi, a învins poate? [...] Ce înseamnă a învinge? Poate că a învinge înseamnă a fi învinsă...*”²²

It is not by accident that Unamuno switches perspectives and reverses the characters’ relationship with the tragic guilt, moving back and forth from Fedra to Hipólito and then to Pedro. The elemental force of Fedra’s passion comes from her living within the horizon of death, and the foreboding and awareness of death give the play a concrete and personal tone, as well as scope to her gesture of assuming her liberty; this horizon lends eternity to a moment’s choice and releases the character from the ancient and modern cultural stereotype about the woman’s condition. It also poses the problem of the ossified meaning of modern theatrical conventions and typologies, circumscribed to Nietzsche’s concepts of Apollonian and Dionysian²³. Fedra is a romantic, pure, sensitive, sensuous, possessive, pathetic, and threatening young woman, for whom life without love is the Inferno. Innocent as she is, she is overwhelmed by the force of her own feelings: „*N-aș fi crezut niciodată că într-un vas atât de fragil precum trupul femeii ar putea încăpea atâta durere fără ca acesta să se sfărâme în bucăți.*”²⁴ An orphan, raised in a monastery, and living in Pedro’s house, she soon becomes aware of the lack of authenticity that characterizes the relationships marred by manipulation that tie her to both father and son, as well as of her burdensome situation that troubles her sensible soul: „*Fedra: Fiul tău are aceeași vârstă cu mine..., ar putea fi fratele meu..., soțul meu.*”²⁵; unlike ancient heroines, Fedra is for the first time confronted with the realities of love – carnal, soul-altering and spiritual – and walks the puzzling steps of inner and ontological clarification and enlightenment, until the moment she “is cured in death”: „*Fedra: [...] Cum se pot uni două iubiri, sau să răsară una din cealaltă?*”²⁶

For the conformist Pedro, Fedra has become the surrogate of a dead woman, possibly employable as a vessel of procreation for a man of old age, and as an instrument of temptation

²² *Fedra*, ed. cit., p. 25, 27, 29.

²³ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Nașterea tragediei*, in *De la Apollo la Faust*, Anthology, foreword and introductory notes by Victor Ernest Mașek, Editura Meridiane, București, 1978.

²⁴ Unamuno, Miguel de, ed. cit., p. 127.

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

for his son, with a view to satisfying the same instinct of perpetuation of his own bloodline: „*Pedro: [...] Tu care ești mai apropiată de el din cauza vârstei, tu care ești confidenta lui, sora lui, mai degrabă decât mama lui, nu l-ai auzit vorbind de asta? [...] Te adoră! El ascunde lucrul acesta, așa cum face cu toate sentimentele lui, dar te adoră, nu te îndoiește de asta. Iar tu îl iubești ca pe propriul tău copil, nu-i așa? [...] Ah, Fedra, nu ți-ai dat silința când l-ai rugat, nici nu ai folosit toată căldura ta! [...] Dacă ai fi știut să-i vorbești inimii lui...*”²⁷ However, faced with the loss of all illusions and desperate to save face, he ends up by bedeviling her, thus revealing the inauthenticity of his own wasted life, a life devoured by clichés: „*Pedro: Cine e de vină, Fedra, cine? El? Tu? Eu? Cine știe ce este vina? [...] Nu știi ce este vina? A fost femeia, femeia a fost cea care a adus vina pe lume!*”²⁸

Fedra’s genuine need for love helps Pedro to push her into Hipólito’s arms, and she is forced to face the reality of a masculinity governed by the serenity of “blind virtue”, of a selfish character, whose boundless freedom and autonomy deny the others; Fedra’s death changes him, making him understand his guilt as an indifferent, insensitive and ultimately hypocritical person in his relationship with her, and his father: „*Hipólito: Da, virtutea mea, o virtute oarbă, era egoism. Simțindu-mă sigur de mine, nu am simțit că ea se scufunda... Și apoi, viața aceea în natură în care am căutat să-mi consum excesul de vitalitate... asta m-a făcut insensibil. [...] Nu, nu pot să mi-o iert... [...] Da, am nevoie de iertarea ei, pentru că am fost atât de orb, pentru că nu am... [...] Acum e nevoie de adevăr, pentru el, pentru mine, pentru ea, pentru a-i păstra mai bine memoria și pentru adevărul însuși, mai presus de toate! [...] Da, tot; adevărul întreg, adevărul după moarte.*”²⁹

Through his play, which reinvents the ancient model, Miguel de Unamuno succeeds in bringing the representation of human passions to the “degree zero”, purifying the residual modern concept of man, and salvaging his greatness, innocence and moral consistency by the intensity of emotion and the simple expression of the sublime.

The analysis of Phaedra’s myth, represented in the tragedies of Euripides, Seneca and Miguel de Unamuno, reveals the innovations brought by demythification and by an overall change of the vision upon woman. The different types of plot (divine, human, and interior) alter

²⁷*Ibidem*, p. 41, 43, 73.

²⁸*Ibidem*, p. 107.

²⁹*Ibidem*, p. 139, 145, 151 153.

the tragic relationship of characters (in terms of moral conventions, aesthetics of existence and genuine living) with the world and with themselves. The heroine's original guilt becomes an error of judgment and a "recoverable failure", and in the evolution of the myth's transfiguration, she is endowed with renewed dignity, enhancing her inherent innocence with relation to the other gender.

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