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“Ha accise i picciriddi”. Emma Dante’s Sicilian Medea

ABSTRACT: Among the many adapters of Euripides’ *Medea* there is also the Sicilian playwright Emma Dante (1967-). The present study provides a key to interpreting the corresponding unpublished text, which over the years has acted as a service text for the staging of *Medea* or *Verso Medea* in Italian and French theatres. It reflects on the contiguity of this adaptation with the poetics of bestiality that Dante created with her work, where she implements a deconstruction of the (Sicilian) family and a reflection on the indissoluble link between life and death.

Keywords: Emma Dante, Medea, family, bestiality, philosophy of life and death.

*Ma l’animale che mi porto dentro /
Non mi fa vivere felice mai /
Si prende tutto, anche il caffè /
Mi rende schiavo delle mie passioni /
E non si arrende mai e non sa attendere /
E l’animale che mi porto dentro vuole te*

*[But the animal I carry inside me /
Never makes me live happily /
It takes everything, even coffee /
It makes me a slave to my passions /
And it never gives up and it can’t wait /
And the animal I carry inside wants you]*

Franco Battiato¹

Among the playwrights whose reception of Euripides’ *Medea* and subsequent rewriting lend themselves to a reinterpretation in terms of a reflection on the bestial nature of mankind and its family structures there is undoubtedly Emma Dante (1967-). A versatile Sicilian author who has shifted between theatre, cinema, and literature, also under the banner of an intermedial self-adaptation, Dante has marked her work by reflecting on tragic themes: “death and life, the family-pack (or family-tribe), incest and violence, madness and fear of the other, imagination and memory, truth and the sacred” (Morace, 2014, p. 105). Dante’s work on *Medea* might seem marginal, if one thinks of what it has produced: an unpublished and undated script, but roughly composed in the very early 2000s, and a handful of performances in mostly Italian and French theatres. And yet the work on this adaptation has not only been long, given that Dante’s Palermo-based company “Sud Costa Occidentale” brought it to the stage for at least ten years,

¹ All translations in the article from the original language are mine.

with the musical collaboration of the Fratelli Mancuso, a pair of multi-instrumentalist brothers, Enzo and Lorenzo, renowned for the tormenting and nostalgic character of their music, who reinterpret the folkloric and ancestral motifs of Sicilian culture with sullen voices full of dolour.

Since 2004, when Dante brought her *Medea* to the Teatro Mercadante in Naples first starring Iaia Forte and Tommaso Ragno, until at least 2017, when the director staged her “spectacle-concert” for the last time at Palazzo Venezia in Rome with Elena Borgogni, Sandro Maria Campagna, Davide Celona, Salvatore D’Onofrio, Roberto Galbo, and Carmine Maringola, the play has undergone that maturation that Dante recognizes as an essential feature of theatre: “Il teatro è continuamente un gesto che muore ma che poi si rigenera l’indomani, quindi una specie di morto vivente [theatre is continually a gesture that dies but then regenerates itself the next day, thus a kind of living dead]” (Dante, 2015, *Per arrivare al silenzio c’è bisogno della musica*). The extensiveness of the work on *Medea* or *Verso Medea* (the names alternate) also reflects Dante’s *modus operandi*. Understanding theatre as a living organism, she wants to see its evolution, also following the evolution of her actors’ bodies, which necessarily change over such long periods of time:

Io faccio un teatro di repertorio, quindi quando nascono i miei spettacoli mi auguro che vivano per almeno dieci anni e così in alcuni casi è stato. Questo cosa significa? Che nel corso di dieci anni i corpi degli attori che li fanno cambiano, quindi non è soltanto un cambiamento legato alla creazione di quello spettacolo ma anche alla vita, al processo di invecchiamento di quello spettacolo, perché il corpo in quel tempo invecchia, quindi la qualità del movimento cambia. Non dico che peggiora, anzi a volte si affina, si mette a punto, diventa ancora più incisiva. Sicuramente quando io lavoro con i miei attori chiedo sempre loro un grande sforzo, legato proprio alla ricerca di un gesto non naturale, che però deve diventare naturale.

[I do repertory theatre, so when my shows are created, I hope they will live for at least ten years, and in some cases they have. What does this mean? That over ten years the bodies of the actors who make them change, so it is not only a change linked to the creation of that show but also to life, to the process of ageing of that show, because the body gets older in that time, so the quality of the movement changes. I don’t say it gets worse, on the contrary, sometimes it gets refined, fine-tuned, it becomes even more incisive. Certainly, when I work with my actors, I always ask them to make a great effort, linked precisely to the search for a gesture that is not natural, but which must become natural.] (Billò *et al.*, 2017, p. 12)

Yet, what most shows how much Dante’s re-elaboration of Euripides’ *Medea* is seminal within her theatre work, beyond the fact that this is part of a personal revisitation of the classical repertoire which includes Sophocles’ Theban plays, Euripides’ *The Bacchae* and *Heracles* and Homer’s *Odyssey*, is precisely the thematic consanguinity with other main works of hers: recalling with this at least those that constitute the critically-acclaimed “Trilogia della famiglia siciliana” (Trilogy of the Sicilian family), namely *mPalermu* (*In Palermo*,

2001), *Carnexzeria* (*Butchery*, 2002) and *Vita mia* (*My Life*, 2004), and works such as *Via Castellana Bandiera* (2008), transposed for cinema in 2013, and *Le sorelle Macaluso* (*The Sisters Macaluso*, 2014), also adapted to film in 2020. The basic idea behind these works, all linked to an endemic Sicilian world, is that the family should be deconstructed, showing it as a place animated more by tensions, selfishness, violence, madness, and grotesque abuse than by mutual affection and support.

This is not because families should always lack a loving dimension, but because being very small social structures, there is also room in them for the negativity of interpersonal relationships, especially in the situations of socio-economic and cultural disadvantage which Dante portrays with her families from the Sicilian proletariat. As she states in an interview, “Le famiglie che mi interessano sono le famiglie in cui è necessario fare riemergere a galla tutta la merda [The families that interest me are the families in which it is necessary to make all the shit surface]” (Billò *et al.*, 2017, p. 18). Dante’s “family” plays propose not only a subversion of hierarchical orders according to the temporal sequences of family membership and the principles of strength and gender, and a disruption of Italian homonationalism (cf. Polizzi, 2020), but also a reflection on the elaboration of trauma and private bereavements (Barsotti, 2017), on loss as an epidermal deformation of the physical as well as the mental.

Hence also the exhausting work of the actors directed by Dante on the body, which is pushed to the limits of what is bearable, fuelling “a tension of the body that at times dissolves, breaking it up into even acrobatic movements, but at others is fragmented into a variety of small moves, micro gestures” (p. 22). The purpose of this theatre “of flesh and blood” is not to show the mechanicity or manoeuvrability of beings – “la marionetta è sempre stato un elemento che ho fatto di tutto per tenere lontano da me [puppetry has always been an element that I have done everything I can to keep away from myself]” (Billò *et al.*, 2017, p. 20) –, but to reach the soul, the interiority, which is inextricably linked with the body, with exteriority.

The bodies of the actors thus show, for example in *Bestie di scena* (*Scene beasts*, 2017) and *La Scortecata* (*The Skinned*, 2017), the transformations of which they become capable by pursuing the metaphysical “nature” of the soul: Dante chases that

momento primordiale della creazione, dove ognuno [...] cerca di arrivare a uno stato brado, a uno stato animalesco appunto, grazie agli stimoli che arrivano dalle quinte, dall’alto, dai lati, e anche allo sguardo insistente dello spettatore

[primordial moment of creation, where each [...] tries to reach a wild state, an animal state precisely, thanks to the stimuli that arrive from the backstage, from above, from the sides, and also to the insistent gaze of the spectator] (Billò *et al.*, 2017, p. 13)

or the “unnaturalness” of states of life such as childhood and old age,

[p]erché la vecchiaia è uno stato della vita innaturale, come lo è la nascita: si nasce, ma si nasce in un modo ‘bestiale’, orribile; non ha niente di poetico in sé l’atto della nascita. Il neonato, che si piscia, si caga, non fa altro che fare delle cose assolutamente animalesche, bestiali, che non hanno niente a che fare con quello che sarà poi la sua vita da adulto, da ‘persona’ insomma. Non sono persone i neonati e non sono persone i vecchi: hanno qualcosa di impersonale, qualcosa che li fa assomigliare molto in queste fasi ‘innaturali’ della vita

[because old age is an unnatural state of life, as is birth: one is born, but one is born in a “bestial”, horrible way; there is nothing poetic about the act of birth in itself. The newborn baby, who pisses and shits him- or herself, does nothing but do absolutely animalistic, bestial things, which have nothing to do with what will be his or her adult life, with his or her “person”. Babies are not persons and old people are not persons: they have something impersonal, something that makes them very similar in these “unnatural” phases of life.] (Billò *et al.*, 2017, p. 14).

In this context, Emma Dante’s *Medea* is a significant work, because it is perfectly in line with the poetics of bestiality that this author has developed in her decades of activity. Critics have noted its remoteness from Euripides’ work (“Dans *Verso Medea* on est assez loin d’Euripide, avouons-le” [In *Verso Medea* we are quite far from Euripides, let’s admit it], Hélot, 2016, p. 29). The divergences do not only concern the otherness of a strongly innovated chorus adapted entirely in the Sicilian language, which comments on the story and catalyses the spectator’s emotional and empathetic response also by means of multilingualism and a plurality of varieties and registers dear to Dante (cf. also Polizzi, 2020, p. 158) and which through the synergy between music and song accentuates the postdramatic aspect of her theatre (Barsotti, 2017, p. 24). They firstly concern the plot, therefore the content level as well as the formal one. In a horizon of sterility, that of a dystopian Corinth where not ancient Greek but a mixture of Italian and Sicilian are spoken, Dante’s *Medea* appears as the only pregnant woman, the only one who can communicate to her female peers (all represented by men in the various stagings, to mark a transgression of the genders and a game with the sexes) about the experience of gestation and motherhood:

Io ‘a chiamavo e idda chiamava i giuramenti. “Medea, sulu tu mi puoi ‘nsegnari a partoriri!” Io ‘a chiamavo, Pupella, e idda, infelice, ci spiava ai santi di fari i testimoni pi chiddu ca ci fici Giasone

[I would call her, and she would invoke the oaths. “Medea, only you can teach me how to give birth!” I would call her, darling, and she, unhappy, would call the saints to witness what Jason had done to her] (Dante, n.d., n.p.).

Medea, in Dante’s version, is betrayed by the leader of the Argonauts even before giving birth. The suffering of this infidelity, of the abandonment of her companion and the condemnation to exile by King

Creon, drives Medea to a self-harm which is manifested in the violence against her pregnant body, abstinence from food, and weeping, even outside a private dimension: “Un mancia, si cunsuma ‘nu duluri, passa tutto ‘u tiempu a chianciri pi l’offisa ca ci fici ‘u maritu [“She does not eat, she is consumed with grief, she spends all her time crying because of the offence her husband caused her”] (Dante, n.d., n.p.). The woman, inserted in a post-Christian horizon “of grace and meaning” (Dante, *Verso Medea*, director’s notes, n.d.), and yet constantly desecrated not only by the gestures but also by the vulgarity of the characters, repeatedly strikes her belly in front of the priest of her community, until she bends over in pain and induces the labour of a multiple birth that finally takes place on the altar of the church:

Il prete spalanca il portone della chiesa e chiamando a squarciagola le donne si precipita fuori. Nel frattempo Medea si distende sull’altare, allarga le cosce e comincia a spingere. Le donne di Corinto accorrono con catini pieni d’acqua e asciugamani. Aiutano Medea che come una cagna sgrava uno per uno i suoi cinque figli. I neonati vengono lavati e coperti da teli di lino, poi si addormentano nel grembo delle donne felici per il lieto evento.

[The priest throws open the church door and, calling out to the women at the top of his voice, rushes out. In the meantime, Medea lies down on the altar, spreads her thighs, and begins to push. The women of Corinth rush in with basins full of water and towels. They help Medea who, like a dog, relieves her five children one by one. The newborns are washed and covered with linen cloths, then fall asleep in the wombs of the women, happy for the joyful event.] (Dante, n.d., n.p.)

The delivery that Dante brings to the stage is a bestial one. Medea gives birth while in the grip of the psychological trauma of the abandonment by her beloved and loss of what her love for Jason had made available to her, even on a material level: a house, a livelihood, and the support of a local community. The scene where the birth takes place is indeed a space of grace and veneration of the divinity, but it is denatured as it sees the birth of children now unwanted by their father and consequently also by their mother. Medea’s children thus become antithetical mirrors of Christ, who – according to tradition – although born in misery was received with joy and love by his putative parents. It is no coincidence that the chorus associates Medea’s children with innocent lambs, a symbol in the New Testament of Christ sacrificed on the cross for the salvation of mankind:

E tu Medea di sti nuccintuzzi
 Vo’ essiri l’uccera maliditta
 Scannarli comu fussiru agnidduzzi
 appennili [sic!] a li cruci di la morti.

[And you, Medea, you want to be the cursed butcher of these innocents, slaughter them like lambs, hang them on the crosses of death.] (Dante, n.d., n.p.)

Dante's Medea is bestial because in this situation of inner turmoil she induces with self-inflicted violence the expulsion of the five foetuses which precedes, in continuity now with the original classical text, the performance of the famous infanticide. In carrying out her revenge on Jason and his new companion Glauce, who dies poisoned, the animality of Medea – in the sense of the emergence of the more strictly physical and instinctual part – is underlined also by means of the derogatory similes relating to non-human animals: Medea unburdens her numerous offspring in the first practicable (and still highly symbolic) place, like a wild dog (“come una cagna”, Dante, n.d., n.p.). The triumph of her instinctuality over her rationality is condensed by Dante through the depiction of her insecurity and instability: the two components of her human nature conflict with each other and do not harmonize, but one ends up temporarily cancelling out the other:

Ma perché mi guardate così, figli miei? Perché mi sorridete? Mio dio, che devo fare? Mi manca il cuore se guardo gli occhi luminosi dei miei figli. No, non posso. Rinuncio all'orrendo progetto. [...] Essi devono morire. [...] So quanto male sto per fare ma la passione dell'animo è più forte in me della ragione.

[But why do you look at me like that, my children? Why do you smile at me? My God, what am I to do? My heart aches when I look at the bright eyes of my children. No, I cannot. I renounce the horrible project. [...] They must die. [...] I know how much evil I am about to do, but the passion of the soul is stronger in me than reason.] (Dante, n.d., n.p.)

The act, after a few moments of rational doubt, of giving in to the impulses of passion and thus to the killing of her children is not conceived by the playwright as a societal gesture, but as a personal and unreflected way of exorcising one's own pain in a moment of extreme vulnerability: the essence of this pain is

il momento in cui Medea, poco più che una bambina, capisce che Giasone l'ha abbandonata, in una fase delicatissima della vita di una donna. [...] Uccide [...] per esorcizzare il dolore, e questo dolore è tutto personale, coincide con il risveglio di un istinto primordiale. Non vi è nulla di sociale nel suo gesto. D'altra parte anche oggi le donne che uccidono i figli lo fanno senza pensare, senza porsi un obiettivo

[the moment when Medea, little more than a child, realises that Jason abandoned her, in a very delicate phase of a woman's life. [...] She kills [...] to exorcise pain, and this pain is entirely personal, coinciding with the awakening of a primordial instinct. There is nothing social in her gesture. On the other hand,

even today, women who kill their children do so without thinking, without having an objective in mind.] (Vindrola, 2015)

Dante's intention is certainly to bring a monster onto the stage, considering that to her "accettare le proprie mostruosità è accettare la verità" ["accepting one's own monstrosities means accepting our truth"] (Pellegrino, 2013), but even more than that, a person who in the fragility of her own desperation, in a fit of rage, kills the children of the man who left her: hence, in conditions of material and moral abandonment. Although the woman's infanticidal raptus shows all its cruelty, the Sicilian playwright is willing to "humanize" her character, showing that her behaviour responds to the possibilities counted within the "animal" and "natural" dimensions of mankind: it is for this reason that, according to Dante, Medea's gesture recurs from the beginning of human history, or the history of motherhood, right up to the present day. The spectator is confronted with the need to mature a sensitivity for the dramatic nature of the circumstance reproduced, thus responding to an ethical dictate of the playwright, and restoring the laceration of care that the reinterpreted infanticide determines on stage. As Dante stated about her recent *Misericordia* (Mery, 2020), which is also a reflection on motherhood, theatre has the task of bringing the spectator to the maturation of "un cuore capace di comprendere la sofferenza, la miseria, la fragilità" ["a heart capable of understanding suffering, misery, and fragility"] (Sciancalepore, 2020). It has to make them "fragile ponendolo di fronte a un problema non per risolverlo, ma per creare consapevolezza e alla fine ci può essere un abbraccio collettivo" ["fragile by confronting them with a problem not in order to solve it, but to create awareness, and in the end there can also be a collective embrace"] (Sciancalepore, 2020).

The way the children are killed is one of the most alienating and at the same time symbolic and desecrating elements of Emma Dante's reworking of *Medea*, because it takes place through the drowning of the five infants in the holy water of the baptism they should have received, inside a church, the place of worship of a Christianity that coexists with Greekness:

| | |
|--|---|
| Caterina | L'ha accise! Ha accise i picciriddi! |
| Giasone | Che dici? |
| Caterina | L'ha affocati! L'ha annegati 'nta l'acqua Benedetta! |
| Giasone | Ma che stai dicendo? Ha avuto il coraggio di questo sacrilegio? |
| Caterina | Durante lo battesimo... l'ha affocati! |
| <i>Appare Medea con un velo nero sul volto</i> | |
| [Caterina | She killed them! She killed the babies! |
| Jason | What are you saying? |

Caterina She drowned them! She drowned them in holy water!
 Jason What are you saying? She had the courage of this sacrilege?
 Caterina During the baptism... she drowned them!
Medea appears with a black veil over her face] (Dante, n.d., n.p.)

In Dante, a syncretism emerges that mixes rituals and pagan and Christian symbols with the “tragic inherited from a Greek classical background, certainly more Dionysian than Apollonian” (Barsotti, 2017, p. 30). Her theatre becomes the ideal heir of Schiller’s theatre (but also of Goethe’s and Voltaire’s), which in a work set in Sicily, *The Bride of Messina* (1803), sought to represent the mixture of mythologies that has historically occurred on the island (cf. Krause, 2014, p. 246). In Dante’s anthropological cartography, which has Sicily as a favourite place, there is therefore the recourse to symbols and signs that recover the essence of a beloved and deformed South (Scattina, 2022), or, rather than deformed, overlaid in its various forms and created anew on paper and stage.

The water in which the children drown, which should have redeemed their original sin, is instead a symbolic return to their mother’s womb, where they were enveloped in amniotic fluid. If the emergence from the water repeats the cosmogonic act of the manifestation of forms, the immersion in the liquid symbolizes the regression to the pre-formal, the reintegration into the undifferentiated mode of pre-existence (Eliade, 1961, p. 151). Dante’s Medea interrupts, with an atrocious gesture, her own descent, refusing the maternal task that is her sole responsibility. The lives of the newborns, legible as broken potentialities, find their end in the same element in which they were generated, showing the consubstantiality of life and death which is a pivotal theme in Dante’s work: “tutto nasce e tutto muore e non c’è un confine tra le due cose. Soprattutto chi muore non se ne va e chi è vivo è già morto [everything is born, and everything dies, and there is no boundary between the two. Above all, the one who dies does not go away and the one who is alive is already dead]” (Billò *et al.*, 2017, p. 18).

In the light of these considerations, it is possible to conclude that Dante’s work should be deemed relevant within the contemporary theatrical hermeneutics of Medea because the laceration of care which the Sicilian playwright posits with her Medea relates less to a political dimension and more to a reflection on the “natural bestiality” of the human race and the drama of abandonment. Although Medea remains a complex figure of rupture, of deconstruction, of (feminine) affirmation of one’s own subjectivity – of an “ego sum, ego existo” (Rancière, p. 59) – in a vulgar horizon that instead would have wanted to suffocate such subjectivity, seeing her only as an object, as a means for the procreation of man, in Dante’s drama, Medea’s ferocity against her family – “il luogo e il tempo dove tutto accade [the place and time where everything happens]” (Billò *et al.*, 2017, p. 18) – tends more to prompt an empathic approach

towards the problematic nature of this character and the ancient, that is, what remains to us of a past time that does not want to pass, “accompli, mais non révolu” (Schweitzer, 2016).

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