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**WHEN AUSTRIAN CLASSICAL TRAGEDY
GOES INTERCULTURAL:
ON THE METRICAL SIMULATION
OF LINGUISTIC OTHERNESS
IN FRANZ GRILLPARZER'S *THE GOLDEN FLEECE***

Abstract:

As Austrian playwright Franz Grillparzer (1791–1872) stated himself, his early masterpiece *The Golden Fleece* (1820) is structured by a basic cultural dualism between Greeks and Colchians. In order to express the gap between these two ethnic groups, his play uses two different metrical schemes: the canonical blank verse, coming from G. E. Lessing and Weimar Classicism, put in the mouth of Greek characters, and free verse for expressing the ‘barbarism’ of non-Greek, i. e., Colchian characters. Grillparzer thus manages to make perceivable for the spectator the linguistic otherness of the characters of the play without using any foreign tongue. This article illustrates the nature and functioning of this culturally and ethnically determined dramatic language, investigating those passages where the question of identity is directly linked to the verse meter. Yet the initial dualism often yields to more complex, hybrid forms of language, in cases where a given character’s identity is blurred. Accordingly, the article discusses the possibilities and limits of that specific kind of simulated multilingualism, and inquires about its meaning in the context of 1820s Vienna and the multicultural and multilingual Habsburg Empire.

Keywords: simulated multilingualism ♦ Austrian literature ♦ metrics ♦ Grillparzer ♦ German drama

Introduction: “As it were distinct tongues”

Among the numerous adaptations of the myth of Medea throughout cultural history, the drama trilogy *Das goldene Vließ* (*The Golden Fleece*), written in 1819-1820 by Franz Grillparzer, stands out for the unique manner in which the Austrian playwright uses dramatic language to signal the otherness that separates the Greeks and the Colchians, the two opposing populations featured in the plot. In his autobiography, written around 1834-1835, some fifteen years after the creation of his *Golden Fleece*, Grillparzer looks back on this dramaturgic peculiarity of his trilogy, where blank verse, used by the characters of Greek origin, contrasts with the free verse employed by the other characters, those considered “barbarians.” In the author’s own words, his objective was indeed:

die möglichste Unterscheidung von Kolchis und Griechenland, welcher Unterschied die Grundlage der Tragik in diesem Stücke ausmacht, weshalb auch der freie Vers und der Jambus, gleichsam als verschiedene Sprachen hier und dort in Anwendung kommen.

the utmost distinction between Colchis and Greece, which distinction constitutes the foundation of tragedy in this play, whence also free verse and iamb come into usage here and there as it were distinct tongues. (Grillparzer 2014: 87–88)¹

In these lines, Grillparzer speaks to his care in rigorously separating the Colchian world from the Greek world, their opposition being qualified as the tragic foundation of the play. This duality was notably meant to manifest through the differentiated use of free verse and iambic pentameter, as if they were two separate dialects: two distinct “tongues” (“Sprachen”), in the author’s own words. In this, the author’s own presentation of the drama’s conception, three points draw our attention:

- the fundamental role accorded to cultural, ethnic and linguistic differences in the economy of the play (“Grundlage der Tragik,” “foundation of tragedy”);

¹ Unless otherwise noted, translated by Christian Steinmetz. For an English translation of the plays, see Grillparzer 1942.

- the idea of a homology between the difference among peoples and metrical differentiation (“weshalb auch,” “whence also”);
- the non-systematic manner in which this contrast between the languages employed by the Greeks and the Colchians is drawn (“hier und dort,” “here and there”).

On this basis, I shall attempt in the following to closely examine, by way of its various manifestations, the nature and functioning of this linguistic differentiation in its correspondence with the opposition between Greeks and “barbarians,” answering the following questions:

- To what extent may one really speak of the presence of “different languages / tongues,” as the playwright suggests?
- To what degree does this difference correspond to two distinct cultural identities—one Greek, the other Colchian?
- What contribution does this differentiation make to the overall comprehension of the tragedy, particularly in the socio-political context of the Habsburg monarchy of Grillparzer’s time?

A play about cultural encounters

Following the conventions of travel literature, the plot of the *Golden Fleece* starts with the arrival of a stranger in unknown lands, a Greek originally from Delphi who lands on the shores of Colchis, bringing the legendary Fleece with him. The sequence of dramatic events, caused by greed for the magical treasure and its sinister consequences, provokes additional journeys and a subsequent back-and-forth between the Peloponnesian and the Oriental shores of the Black Sea. It is a story of migration, exile, asylum, and more generally of contact between cultures, which Grillparzer’s adaptation emphasises by being the first in theatre history to retrace the origins of the Golden Fleece.

The Greco-Colchian dualism that constantly emerges throughout this drama whenever the two antagonistic peoples meet and come into conflict is of a cultural order, in the sense that it is not only based on their rivalry in fighting for wealth and power, but more broadly on their differences in lifestyle, value systems, traditions, etc. It is notably the

character of Medea who underscores these differences, as she does here at the beginning of the third part, shortly after her arrival in Corinth (*Medea*, v. 123–124):²

Was recht uns war daheim, nennt man hier unrecht,
Und was erlaubt, verfolgt man hier mit Haß. (116)

What was our right at home, they here call unjust,
And what was allowed, they here pursue with hatred.

Between Colchis and Greece, the cultural norms have changed; the communal rules previously internalised by Medea and her nurse Gora are no longer valid. These differences do not, however, stem from simple cultural relativism in the sense of a coexistence of peoples each having their specificity and peculiarities. On the contrary, their contact and coming into conflict provoke a fatal chain reaction of violence, a vicious circle of aggressions and counter-aggressions for which the Golden Fleece serves as a symbol. The gap between Greeks and Colchians originates in a fundamentally xenophobic attitude, based on a categorical and structuring opposition between an “us” and a “them,” between self and Other, trimmed down to a difference between friend and foe.

From the very start of the play, King Aeëtes, father of Medea, condenses this antagonism into a telling equation: “*s sind Fremde, sind Feinde*” (11, “they’re strangers, are foes”). The xenophobic mistrust on the part of the Colchian sovereign spontaneously identifies any stranger as an enemy—not only potential, but very real. Nor is this attitude in any way unilateral, or at the expense of the Greeks only. In the last part of the trilogy, it is instead the Colchians arrived in Corinth who are ostracised, victims of ambient xenophobia and of rejection as non-Greeks. In accordance with the antagonistic duality explicitly predicted by Grillparzer, the universe of the play seems structurally opposed to any overture towards the Other, with a generalised hostility instead characterising the relationship with anything coming from abroad.

The Hellenic-barbarian dualism

It is well known that this intellectual scheme harkens back to the ancient dualism between Hellenic and “barbaric” that lies at the very heart of all cultural dichotomies, of the

² For reasons of convenience, Grillparzer’s trilogy is cited indicating both the page numbers from the German edition (Grillparzer 2015) and verse numbers.

distinction between ourselves and the others, between Occident and Orient, West and East, etc. It has inhabited the various versions of the myth of Medea, since at the latest the Euripides tragedy dating to 431 BCE. For Grillparzer, over 2000 years later, this dualism infuses his *Golden Fleece* throughout, manifesting in multiple forms, such as the opposition of Greeks against Colchians, civilised men against savages, humans against animals, and so on.

If xenophobia is a psychological trait shared by these two peoples (see Winkler 2009: 183), the Greeks nevertheless clearly delineate themselves from the Colchians by their claim of a monopoly on humanity, which they appropriate as “superior men.” Indeed, the depreciative discourse denigrating the inferior state of the other as “barbarian” is primarily a characteristic of the Greeks, as Medea notably testifies in the last part of the trilogy (v. 400–404):

Weil eine Fremd' ich bin, aus fernem Land
 Und unbekannt mit dieses Bodens Bräuchen,
 Verachten sie mich, sehen auf mich herab,
 Und eine scheue Wilde bin ich ihnen,
 Die Unterste, die Letzte aller Menschen (127)³

Since a stranger I am, from a faraway country
 And unacquainted with this land's customs,
 They despise me and look down on me,
 And a shy savage am I to them,
 The lowest, the least-most of all people.

Not only does Medea ignore the customs of the country where she has ended up; she is rejected out of hand as a stranger. It is worth underscoring the identification made here among the foreign origin of a woman (“*eine Fremd' [...] aus fernem Land,*” “a stranger [...] from a faraway country”), her supposed state of savagery (“*eine scheue Wilde,*” “a shy savage”) and her qualification as an inferior being (“*die Unterste, die Letzte aller Menschen,*” “the lowest, the least-most of all people”).

Markus Winkler (2009) has brilliantly analysed this “semantics of the barbarian” and its opposition to Greekness as these underly the Greco-Colchian dualism depicted by

³ See also 121 (*Medea*, v. 254-255): “*Vergessen jenen Hohn, mit dem der Grieche / Herab auf die Barbarin sieht, auf – dich?*,” “Did you forget that contempt, with which the Greek / looks down on the barbarian, on – you?”

Grillparzer. On the whole, we note that Hellenocentricity, this feeling of superiority proper to the Greeks, is visibly more present in this play than is Colchian xenophobia.

The ethno-racial aspects of cultural difference

Within the world of the play, the gap between these two peoples is such that their coexistence ultimately appears to be impossible. This idea is for instance voiced by nurse Gora upon her arrival in Corinth in Medea's company (*Medea*, v. 1192–1193):

Hier Lands ist nicht Raum für uns [= die Kolcher],
Die Griechen, sie hassen, sie töten dich. (156)

On these shores there is not room for us [= Colchians],
These Greeks, they hate, they kill you.

Though we may debate the literal or figurative meaning given here to the verb “to kill” (“*sie töten dich*,” “they kill you”), these words underscore the violence of the conflict, ranging from visceral hatred to actual violence, which confronts the communities in a logic of “us against them” or “Colchians against Greeks.” In the *Golden Fleece*, ethnocentrism, xenophobia and murderous violence are indeed inextricably intertwined, and together form a continuum. It is important to note that Grillparzer's relation to Antiquity differs substantially from the idealistic, universalist and cosmopolitan vision characteristic of Weimar Classicism, which rather neglects these political, social and ethnic issues (see Winkler 2009: 74).

This mutual hostility among population groups is not a simple anthropological fact, but refers to a more profound and highly problematic difference. The difference between Greeks and Colchians is not only of a cultural or tribal order, but it is in fact ethnic in essence, as demonstrated by Jason's words in the second part of the trilogy. Here we find the binary structure of “us against them” rendered ethnic, intersecting with the opposition between Hellenic / Greek and barbarian / Colchian: “*Ich ein Hellene, du Barbarenblut*” (81, *Die Argonauten*, v. 1204, “I Hellene, you of barbaric blood”). At the beginning of the play, Phrixus, that other Greek, had already called out: “*Von Griechen, ich ein Grieche, reinen Bluts*” (17, *Der Gastfreund*, v. 264, “Of Greeks, I a Greek, pure of blood.”) The term of blood used by these Greek characters is revelatory in the degree to which ethnic difference, underscored many times throughout the trilogy, seems ultimately to be a feature of what one may term an anti-“barbaric,” anti-Colchian racism. This racial

theme, expressed as ideas of pure blood and white skin, appears clearly in these characters' words.

While it will take until the twentieth century to see an author cast Medea as a black woman⁴, we witness already since Herodotus in the fifth century BCE a depiction of the Colchians by the Greeks as a dark-skinned people (Winkler 2009: 217). This representation participates in a segregational view of humanity based on a criterion of skin colour, between white and black, a view that an attentive reading also detects in *The Golden Fleece*—so much so that Dagmar C. Lorenz already in 1986 deemed recognisable in Grillparzer's Colchis “the black continent, Africa.”⁵ Without going so far as to situate the play in the context of the discourse about racial inequality that was coming into being in Grillparzer's time (Winkler 2009: 61), it seems obvious that the depiction of Medea as savage, as “dark”⁶—in contrast to the “whiteness” of Creusa⁷, the civilised Greek—refers not only to a cultural difference, but to an ethno-racial one, capable of denigrating the peoples foreign to the Greek world to animal status (Winkler 2009: 31).

In this respect, one can for instance cite the words of Milo, one of the Argonauts, who at the end of the second part of the play (*Die Argonauten*, v. 1650–1652) speaks of the Colchians in terms germane to circus animals or freak show beasts:

Ha! bringen wir die wilden Tiere alle
Nach Griechenland, ich Sorge, man erdrückt uns,
Die Seltenheit zu sehn! (101)

Hah! Let us bring the wild beasts all
to Greece, I worry they shall trample us,
To see this curiosity!

Certainly we must also acknowledge that, through the love relationship between Jason and Medea, *The Golden Fleece* tells the story of an attempt to abolish all these differences through the utopian endeavour of forging a language of love that would overcome ethnic and cultural attributions (Winkler 2009: 203). Yet are we also cognisant of the bitter end with which this attempt shall be rewarded: “*Der Traum ist aus, allein die*

⁴ See Hans Henny Jahn, *Medea. Tragödie* (1926). See also *Médée* (1947) by Jean Anouilh, where the heroine lives in a gypsy-like wagon.

⁵ Lorenz 1986: 68: “In Grillparzers Kolchis ist unschwer der schwarze Kontinent Afrika zu erkennen.”

⁶ See for instance *Medea*, v. 456, p. 129 and *Medea*, v. 1355, p. 161.

⁷ See in particular *Medea*, v. 2204, p. 192 and *Medea*, v. 676, p. 137.

Nacht noch nicht” (198, “the dream is over, only the night as yet is not”) says Medea in the tragedy’s final scene (*Medea*, v. 2369).

Metric differentiation and linguistic otherness

Having thus briefly illuminated the ethno-cultural issues at work in the play, I shall presently investigate a particular expression of the Greco-Colchian dualism in *The Golden Fleece*: the metric differentiation of dramatic language. As indicated at the outset, it is the playwright himself who suggests this angle of approach by asserting in his autobiography that the gap between the worlds of the Greeks and the Colchians would conspicuously manifest in the form of linguistic differences, of a dualism of idioms presumed to separate the two cultures, the two peoples.

Yet, while Grillparzer actually uses the term “tongues / languages” (“*Sprachen*”), we have to specify that this refers not to actual languages in the proper sense, but instead to a metric and rhythmic differentiation within the German language. All throughout the play, the Greeks essentially express themselves in iambic metre, in the form of blank verse, while the Colchians primarily employ a much looser metre, free verse. In other words, Grillparzer somehow deprives the Colchians of blank verse (*Blankvers*) which, since Lessing, had become the norm of German drama, thus conferring upon them a less noble diction, one that was crude, if not to say savage. In view of the foregoing analyses, blank verse would thus spontaneously associate with Greek *logos*, while the Colchian characters would be distinguished by their *barbarophonis*, their non-mastery of Greek, the only language recognised by the Hellenes. Nevertheless, this dramaturgical gimmick also aims to give the Colchians their own, separate language—and thus one outside the norms.

We know that Grillparzer’s aim was to incarnate in the most effective manner the abyss between the Colchian world and the Greek world; this was, according to his own words, the essence of tragedy in his play. The most likely issue for him was to figure out how to suggest to the contemporary reader or spectator that these peoples, thrown into contact with one another, not only hail from different countries but do not speak the same tongue. It would seem that he sought to represent this Greco-Colchian dualism by way of the characters’ very diction, in order to give a sensory, auditory dimension to the otherness that separates these two cultures. In this respect, working through metre allows him to introduce linguistic alterity, without however crossing the boundaries of a single

language, thereby risking compromising the spectator's or reader's comprehension. We might well consider this a true invention and innovation in aesthetic and dramaturgical terms, even if similar methods have been employed since Antiquity.⁸

At a time when the use of foreign languages in literature was essentially a comic device, strictly ascribed to comedy⁹, Grillparzer's methodology can be qualified as 'modern' to the extent that it reveals a new sensitivity for cultural diversity, such as was contemporaneously manifesting, for instance, in the writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt.¹⁰ While the playwright does not yet dare jump ahead to truly multilingual writing, as would some of his successors from the 1880s (see Weissmann 2013), still he manages, through metric differentiation, to create a fiction of multilingualism to embody cultural difference, by making this perceivable at the level of the actors' speech.

Metre as cultural marker

All throughout the *Golden Fleece*, metrical difference as expression of linguistic otherness thus seems to attribute to each character a tongue corresponding to their origins and cultural characteristics. Ethnocultural differentiation is thus mirrored in an analogous idiomatic differentiation; form and content converge to embody on stage the mutual alterity that separates these characters from the opposing cultures. Nonetheless, the analogy ("*gleichsam als*," "as it were," 2014: 87–88) between the metrical work of German verse and the difference between two distinct languages, two foreign tongues, remains limited. It must be observed that, despite the idea Grillparzer advances of two dictions functioning "as it were two languages," everyone seems perfectly capable of mastering the other's tongue, as if the entire *dramatis personae* unfolded in a context of more or less generalised diglossia. All in all, the fiction of multilingualism suggested by

⁸ Winkler (2009: 25) cites Aeschylus who, in *The Persians*, uses writing methods aiming to create the illusion of a foreign language spoken by this foreign people. The use of metre as a means to differentiate the voices of a dramatic text prove to be in use elsewhere in European literary history—notably with Shakespeare and Goethe.

⁹ On the use of multilingual methods in theatre, see Weissmann 2012.

¹⁰ See for instance von Humboldt's 1836 *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaus und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts*. Grillparzer's sensitivity to the question of linguistic difference appears for instance in this notable aphorism from his diary entry #1394 from the year 1824: "Zum Singen ist die italienische Sprache, etwas zu sagen: die deutsche, darzustellen: die griechische, zu reden: die lateinische, zu schwatzen: die französische, für Verliebte: die spanische und für Grobiane: die englische" (1909ff: 148, "For singing, there is the Italian language; for talking: German; for explaining: Greek; for speeches: Latin; for gossip: French; for lovers: Spanish; and for ruffians: English.")

metric differentiation does not bring forth a profound otherness; rather than distinct languages, it seems to correspond to soft cultural markers, more like dialects or other linguistic variations.

Mirroring the traditional hierarchy between Greeks and Colchians, languages attributed to the different peoples are of course not neutral, but include at least implicitly a culturally determined aesthetic judgement. Thus, the nobility, elegance and musicality of blank verse, the canonical metre of classical German drama, are associated with Greekness in strict accordance with Winckelmann's aesthetics (Winkler 2009: 59). This is contrasted with the lack of rhetoric mastery that characterises the cruder, wilder, almost savage expression of the "barbarians," who use free verse with unstable metre, irregular length, and an often elliptical character reminiscent of prose (Winkler 2009: 184; Müller 1963: 36). In *Die Argonauten* (v. 881–882), the King of Colchis himself calls attention to the clumsy, rough, even uncouth nature of "barbarophonía" that characterises him and his subjects: "*Ist auch rauh meine Sprache, fürchte nichts*" (66, "Though is rough my speech, fear naught"). It is interesting to note that these words are uttered in the middle of a long exchange on the occasion of the first encounter between Aeëtes and Jason, where the Greek Argonaut's iambic flow is regularly interrupted by the metreless free verse of the "barbarian" king.

Some examples

Let us examine in more detail the functioning of this metric differentiation in Grillparzer's *The Golden Fleece*. Without entering too much into the subtleties of German metric (and thus also foregoing any discussion of the rediscovery and adaptation of traditions of Elizabethan drama in Weimar Classicism), I shall start by recalling the basic structure of blank verse through an example from *Nathan the Wise*, one of the founding instances of this metric form in German literature. It is indeed unrhymed iambic pentameter, with the stressed syllables shaded here to illustrate the regularity of the iambic form. The opening verses of this piece are thus:

[Daja:] Er ist es! Nathan! – Gott sei ewig Dank,
 Daß Ihr doch endlich einmal wiederkommt! (Lessing 1993: 485)

As described previously, Grillparzer primarily uses blank verse to characterise the tongue or linguistic variant spoken by the Greeks. The regular and harmonious stress pattern enables a strong contrast with the more hurried, clashing, polymetric verse of the

“barbarians.” Here is an extract from the first confrontation between Phrixus and Aeëtes, at the beginning of the *Golden Fleece* trilogy (*Der Gastfreund*, v. 213–217). The blank verse of the Greek traveller, whose eloquence is part of the generalised loquacity peculiar to all the Greek characters in the play, contrasts with the free verse of the Colchian king, whose speech seems to hesitate between iamb and trochee:

[Phrixus:] Der du ein Gott mir warest in der Tat
 Wenn gleich dem Namen nach, mir Fremden, nicht [...]
 [Aeëtes:] Was ist das?
 Er beugt sein Knie dem Gott meiner Väter!
 Denk' der Opfer, die ich dir gebracht, (15)

While the iambic structure, with five stresses per line, is easily recognisable in Phrixus's lines and dominates this conversation, the metre of Aeëtes's lines allows different readings; even the binary structure of his rhythm—iamb or trochee—is not self-evident, other interpretations being possible. The result, however, is quite obvious in terms of contrast and rupture. When Greeks and Colchians are face to face, the difference in language, expressed by metrical opposition, thus illustrates and reinforces the cultural otherness separating them.

As another example, we may consider the scene of the first encounter between Medea and Jason, where linguistic alterity doubtlessly serves to express the feeling of strangeness that holds sway between these two characters, who are separated by everything but whom fate shall unite by passion. The passage in question (*Die Argonauten*, v. 378–380) actually precedes their very first true encounter; Jason expresses himself in blank verse, while Medea's speech seems to systematically avoid their use for dozens of lines (see Kaiser 1961: 26–27). Here is a brief extract from this passage:

[Jason:] Man kommt! – Wohin? – Verbirg mich dunkler Gott!
 [Medea:] Es ist so schwül hier, so dumpf!
 Feuchter Qualm drückt die Flamme der Lampe [...] (45)

In this instance, the differentiation not only applies to the regularity of metre and stress, but also to the number of syllables separating stresses. Furthermore, the exact metric structure—binary, ternary?—of Colchian verse here is again subject to interpretation. Rather than searching for a unified or distinct description for each individual line, we

must think in terms of contrast and difference (“*möglichste Unterscheidung*,” “the utmost distinction,” according to Grillparzer 2014: 87–88) between these two cultures and the speech of their members. In this context, the effect of opposition emerges clearly in numerous passages.

The language setting of the play in comparison with historical reality

This basic dualism, between two cultures and two languages—defined by the author himself as the motor of dramatic action—corresponds not to a realistic historical setting, but rather to a mythological one. The manner in which Grillparzer stages linguistic identities in his adaptation of the myth of Medea indeed contradicts the findings of historical linguistics. His vision of the world of Antiquity, which serves as the setting for *The Golden Fleece*, suppresses a series of internal heterogeneities within these cultures, which his play tends to treat as organic units rather than representing them in their historical complexity.

Regarding the history of Ancient Greece, it is worth noting first that before the advent of the *koiné* in the classical era, that is to say before Alexander the Great, there existed no *lingua franca* across the different parts of the Greek world, as evoked in the play under such names as Iolcus and Corinth, for instance.¹¹ The linguistic dualism as conceived by Grillparzer, however, suggests precisely the existence of a unique Greek language shared by all its characters, whatever their origin. Among Phrixus, Jason and the Amphictyonian herald, there is indeed no evidence of the playwright’s willingness to differentiate their tongues, despite how they hail from different regions with distinct dialects, such as Dorian and Aeolian.

On the side of the Colchians, we observe a similar homogenisation, even if the historical situation is not exactly the same. According to Greek chronicles, the Georgian language had indeed been spoken in Colchis since ancient times; there may well have been a common language spoken in this territory since the mythic era of the story of the Fleece. Colchis was nevertheless inhabited at the time by several different tribes, tribes that were certainly close but had distinct traits and used at least partially different dialects (see Braund 1994). Consequently, the general homogeneity of the Colchian people suggested in Grillparzer’s play emerges as just as fictional, and indeed of a mythical essence. The

¹¹ See for instance the classic work by Antoine Meillet, *Aperçu d’une histoire de la langue grecque* (reprinted 2004).

desire to create a strong contrast between two peoples leads to an excessive homogenisation of both sides.

The assumption of a cultural and linguistic uniformity serving as the basis for the construction of a dichotomy of Greek and Colchian identity in *The Golden Fleece* thus appears to be contradicted by the historical realities of Antiquity. Within the context of a literary work inspired by a myth, this is of course not objectionable—indeed in a way quite normal, even trivial. It nonetheless follows that Grillparzer’s approach reveals his view on cultural and linguistic conflicts, and that his view is influenced by the context of emerging nationalist constructions at his own time. The way the story plays out indeed suggests Grillparzer conceived the cultures and languages of his trilogy as a mirror image of modern European nations, which is both a historical anachronism and a perfectly legitimate literary conceit. The desire for homogeneity among modern nations, however, also conflicts with a spectrum of cultural and linguistic identities that, even within Grillparzer’s dramatic universe, seems significantly more complex than the author’s own claims in his autobiography would lead one to assume.

A differentiation without ethnolinguistic essentialism

Though he explicitly highlighted his dramaturgical intention of differentiation and separation between two peoples and two territories, Grillparzer nonetheless does not attempt an ethnic essentialisation of language. Such an essentialism would be thwarted from the outset by the fact that blank verse, as a metre, is difficult to attach to some Greek origin or nature, whereas the introduction of free verse into German literature is, in contrast, directly linked to the influence of the classical Greek tradition. Grillparzer thus does not create an immutable association nor an inseparable link between the dramatic languages and ethnic origins of his characters: he is content merely to simulate, by way of metric contrast, a plurality of idioms. The dividing lines between the two communities notwithstanding, his characters are not locked into a single idiom in accordance with the blank verse / free verse dichotomy. The linguistic dualism is in fact not without exceptions, and there is no rigid ethnolinguistic system holding sway. Instead, the play implements changes, deviations and evolutions that add depth and complexity to the dramatic characters created by the author.

In opposition to the explicit ethnoracial criteria exhibited by the ethnocentric discourse and the xenophobia that pervade the trilogy, the metrical aspects of the dramatic language

seem to suggest a certain mobility of identities. It comes as no surprise that Medea is the character who accomplishes the most remarkable evolution in this sense, by manifesting the most appreciable vigour and momentum. In conjunction with her efforts at assimilating into Greek culture, her language undergoes important modifications. Throughout the last part of the trilogy, Medea's lines rely more and more on iambic metre, and frequently blank verse proper. During the second act of *Medea* (which is part three of the dramatic trilogy) in particular, her significant mastery of iambic verse seems to demonstrate if not a successful integration, at least a strong desire for assimilation.¹²

Once again, one might speak of a perfect alignment of form and content: Medea's willingness to become a "Greek woman among Greeks"¹³ is reflected in the evolution of a metric pattern, from free verse towards iambic pentameter, which emerges through her lines. Mirroring the ultimate failure of assimilation of this "barbarian" woman, however, her iambic rhythms and blank verse fail to permanently triumph¹⁴; her language frequently relapses into the free verse of her original idiom.¹⁵ In addition to an atavistic tendency that seems to regularly bring Medea back to her Colchian origins, there are also moments of acute emotional tension, as for example the scene of Jason's betrayal, when she expresses herself in a changing metre that, in its way of expressing her cultural and mental distance with regard to this foreign Greek man who has betrayed her, recalls their first meeting (*Medea*, v. 1041, p. 150).

Moreover, these situations of strong emotion that punctuate the entire dramatic action do not concern the character of Medea alone.¹⁶ Jason himself comes into "metric troubles" when an extreme situation makes him veer into the "barbarian" idiom represented by free verse. This is the case for instance in the dragon's lair scene in the second part of the trilogy (*Die Argonauten*, v. 1505–1556, p. 95–97). Confronted with this cave, Jason finds

¹² See for instance *Medea*, v. 370–413, p. 126–127; *Medea*, v. 617–640, p. 135–136; *Medea*, v. 672–698, p. 137–138. See also Kaiser 1961: 27–28.

¹³ "Hier Griechen eine Griechin!" (*Die Argonauten*, v. 1406, p. 89, "Here, Greeks, a Greek woman!"); "Sei eine Griechin du in Griechenland," (*Medea*, v. 190, p. 118, "Be you a Greek woman in Greece.")

¹⁴ Onward from v. 925 of the last part ("Ich lebe! lebe!"), Medea begins once more to abandon iambic metre. On this topic, see Kaiser 1961: 28; see also v. 1055–1088, p. 150–151, where Medea seems to vacillate between the two forms.

¹⁵ See, among others, the following examples: *Medea*, v. 1121–1124, v. 1159–1168, v. 1171–1184, v. 1121–1124 and *passim*, p. 152–156). See Kaiser 1961: 27–28; see also Winkler 2009: 223.

¹⁶ See also *Medea*, v. 1443–1464, p. 165, an account of the horrendous death of King Pelias; and *Medea*, v. 1676–1698, p. 173, in which she implores her children to stay with her.

himself in the grip of an archaic, primitive and frightening world, which also represents the world of Medea and Colchis in general, such that he is temporarily deprived of the nobility of his “own” classical blank verse.¹⁷

In his ground-breaking study, Joachim Kaiser highlights the fact that, more generally, what is most telling and revelatory in Grillparzer’s plays is not a strict respect for formal rules such as metric patterns, but rather the deviations from such more or less explicit norms (1961: 17–18). In short, variation matters more than the underlying pattern. The findings from his analysis seem to be confirmed given the use of blank verse in *The Golden Fleece*, notably among the Greek characters, where a change of metre is indicative of psychological disturbance or a questioning of identity. From this perspective, the recourse to free verse would be more significant dramatically than the use of blank verse as an instance exemplifying the norm. Following Kaiser, we find confirmation once more for the importance of metrical differentiation and its impact in aesthetic, dramaturgical and psychological terms.

It remains to be said that there are also numerous other metrical changes in the trilogy that are not as easily understood, such as the strong presence of blank verse in the lines of the Colchians, particularly at the very beginning of the trilogy¹⁸, or during the fourth act of the second part.¹⁹ Are these voluntary irregularities? Are these incoherences? Or a (subconscious) return to the norm? Indeed, the author himself underscored the fact that his dualism of idioms, the opposition of two languages linked with two peoples, would only hold “here and there” (2014: 87–88). The contrasting of metrical patterns therefore cannot be confirmed as a consistent dramaturgical principle.

The critical dimension of metrical differentiation

Rather than identify with an innate, ethnically determined idiom, the two metrical patterns in the play thus correspond rather to soft cultural markers employed in a non-systematic, selective manner. In light of this, the use of free verse mainly seems to be evidence of a general proclivity towards a state of nature—more instinctive, more

¹⁷ See Kaiser 1961: 27. See also Jason's line alluding to Medea's influence on him: “*halb Barbar, zur Seite der Barbarin*” (*Medea*, v. 491, p. 130, “half barbarian, at the side of the barbarian woman”).

¹⁸ Over the first ten pages of the trilogy, approximately half the verses can be read as blank verse. See Kaiser 1961: 144.

¹⁹ See for instance *Die Argonauten*, v. 1688, 1691–94, 1700, 1707, 1709, 1711–1713, 1740, 1753, 1763, p. 103–108. See Kaiser 1961: 144.

primitive than blank verse. Yet can the use of blank verse, in turn, be conceived of as the expression of an exemplary state of civilisation? From the point of view of the Greek characters, the principle of linguistic power and dominance seems to be obvious, since the blank verse is supposed to embody exemplary humanity and culture in the face of surrounding “barbarism.” However, the metrical pattern used by the Hellenes also seems to convey a certain critical perspective on the part of the playwright, as shown by certain noteworthy details.

There are for instance the numerous verse lines that are broken amid the interaction between the play’s two central characters, where Jason’s iambs mostly dominate Medea’s verse²⁰: might this not be understood as an illustration of hegemonic masculinity, with the Colchian woman appearing as a victim of patriarchal domination? On the symbolic level, the Greek man’s metre seems in this case to subjugate the “barbarian” woman’s language. In the same vein, one could also cite the following exchange (*Die Argonauten*, v. 1415 and 1428) where Jason as a dominant male seems to take over his wife’s words in order to correct them, completing her four-foot free verse in order to turn it into iambic pentameter:

[Medea:] Ich sage dir, sprich nicht davon [...]

[Jason:] Ich aber muß, nicht sprechen nur davon, [...] (90)

The lack of form and rhythmic harmony, for which one might reproach Medea’s verse, is thus transformed by Jason into blank verse; (masculine) Greekness supersedes (feminine) “barbarism.”

Might these metric details not ultimately reveal an illustration of Medea’s role as a dominated, subordinate, subaltern female victim in contrast with the image of Greeks as violent oppressors and exploiters (see Lorenz 1986: 68; Winkler 2009: 178 and 270)? From this point of view, blank verse may emerge not only as the idiom of civilised men, but also as that of machos, conquerors and invaders. A close examination of the use of blank verse reveals that supposed Greek cultural superiority appears to contain a number of grey areas. The dualist vision advertised by the playwright himself begs to be nuanced, such that one might ask whether the differentiation of idioms does not concurrently

²⁰ See for instance *Die Argonauten*, v. 905 and 921, p. 67–68.

represent a dramaturgic means of questioning, perhaps subverting, the very dichotomy of “civilisation” versus “barbarism.”

A pluralist vision beyond dualism

Undeniably, there is more to the opposition between blank verse and free verse than the embodiment of an insurmountable strangeness separating Greeks and Colchians. The metrical variations amid the dramatic language are not limited to the illustration and cementing of a dualistic gap; they are in a way also the formal expression of a pluralist vision. The differentiation of idioms is neither systematic nor static: it simultaneously questions the border that separates them. Difference and variation often win out over identity and essence. Similarly, the play with metrical forms allows for the highlighting of surprising, disturbing or unspoken aspects of characters. Linguistic difference emerges in this regard as the most subtle, nearly subversive means of illustrating the characters’ struggle with identity in this play.

Given the non-systematic nature of the differentiation of idioms, one might indeed say that the language of Jason and Medea is able to evolve toward the language of the respective other, symbolised by the alternating metric pattern. This is so because from the start their characters comprised a certain amount of Otherness that distanced them from their primitive community, but which could also provide the basis for the birth of a truly common language. In this context, we might also recall the opening passages of the trilogy, where the “barbarians” use blank verse (see note 17 above). Beyond any simplistic view, the use of metre thus questions the idea that the Greek and Colchian cultures of the play were to be separated by a hermetic border or an insurmountable abyss. Quite to the contrary, the observed fluctuations suggest the existence of a zone of hybridity where Greekness and barbarity mingle within the characters.

Following the work of other scholars like Hans-Georg Werner (1993), Markus Winkler has judiciously demonstrated that the Greek and Colchians peoples of Grillparzer’s play possess intertwined hybrid cultures, regardless of the playwright’s attempts to separate them (2009: 250–251). In this way, Greek nobility is not a trait reserved to the Greeks alone, nor is barbarian behaviour foreign to those who think themselves paragons of civilised humanity (2009: 222). The spontaneous hybridity of idioms for certain characters thus forms part of a general cultural hybridity between Greeks and Barbarians, a hybridity that certain characters try to deny, just as they try to negate the cultural and

racial crossbreeding embodied by and resulting from the union between Jason and Medea, in the hopes of restoring the supposed purity of their origins (2009: 218).

Indeed, is the xenophobic violence that frequently surfaces in the play not best explained as at least in part motivated by a desire to eradicate that shared community of traditions, emblematically incarnated by Jason and Medea, that improbable transcultural and transethnic couple? Like the statue of Peronto in the first part of the trilogy, a god worshipped by both the Colchians and Phrixus the Greek, the “different tongues” of the characters—based on a common language, German—seem to suggest the existence of a cultural common ground for these two population groups, at once so different and so similar. In this sense, the metrical differentiation of idioms can be read as signalling simultaneously the otherness within a shared language, as well as the shared identity preceding this alterity.

Contextualising Grillparzer’s language setting: The Habsburg monarchy

The intercultural, migratory and colonial issues at work in Grillparzer’s trilogy are one of the chief reasons why it has experienced a surge in popularity among stage directors over the last decade. *The Golden Fleece* readily lends itself to a contemporary reading based on theories and insights from cultural and postcolonial studies, and equally so on the socio-political context of the migration crisis shaking Europe in recent years. For my part, I would like to conclude this contribution with an attempt to situate the play and its treatment of cultural and linguistic difference within the historical context of its composition and release in the 1820s. Thus I propose to see in Grillparzer’s trilogy the subtle but very tangible expression of the cultural and linguistic conflicts simmering in the Habsburg monarchy of his time. We can thus read the struggle between Greeks and Colchians as a reflection of the difficult coexistence of different peoples constituting the Austrian Empire.

To support this interpretation, we must call to mind that, when contrasting Austria and Germany, Grillparzer has frequently identified the Slavic (and by extension Magyar) element of the Austrian Empire as its feminine part, with its feminine charm, while seeing the Germanic element, in thrall to the Prussian spirit, as the incarnation of its masculine part.²¹ Based on this authorial conception, may we not distinguish in Medea’s

²¹ See Stieg 2013: 206. This representation approximates an auto-stereotype one finds for a number of Slavic cultures.

character, originally endowed with a minor idiom, a symbol for the minority populations vindicating with increasing vigour their autonomy from Vienna and the Germanic world in general at the time? It is indeed interesting to note that, in *The Golden Fleece*, the conflict between men and women, on one hand, and the cultural and national conflict, on the other, tend to merge. Medea is at the same time a woman in search of emancipation and the prominent representative of a foreign minor culture, trying to coexist with a dominant culture marked by male chauvinism.

An objection to this suggested interpretation might be the fact that the conflict of nationalities at the heart of the Austrian Empire is historically posterior to the trilogy, which was composed around 1820, while the nationalisms would not become virulent until after the caesura of 1848. However, the anachronism here is but one of appearance. Indeed, well before the advent of proper nationalist movements as such, the language issue, notably in the form of the imposition by Joseph II of German as the official language of the Empire, had already sparked vehement resistance among other ethnolinguistic groups, primarily the Magyars (Kann 1964: 58–59). These early outcries, since the end of the 18th century, contain the budding seeds of the later nationalist demands that Grillparzer would end up deploring. They illustrate the stakes of the linguistic question well before the birth of nationalist discourse, properly speaking.

In the same line of thinking, might one not also see in the Greeks of the trilogy, characterised at the outset by the noble and dominating idiom of blank verse, an incarnation of the Germanic part of the Empire, which was a threat for the specifically Austrian identity? Greekness would thus be the expression of a superior culture, called upon to rule over others (according to Grillparzer), but at the same time also embodying the danger to which an excessive ethnocentrism akin to the nascent Prusso-German nationalism would subject the Habsburg monarchy. In this respect, it is tempting to cite Grillparzer's famous epigram, according to which history's trajectory is to lead "from humanity through nationality to bestiality" ("Von der Humanität durch Nationalität zur Bestialität," 1960: 500). The phrase shows nationalism—whether Slavic, Magyar or German—to be the principal vector in the abandonment of the Enlightenment in favour of a return to barbarism, at the very heart of civilisation. This evolution can be found mirrored in the very plot of the trilogy, where it is revealed in the barbaric part that infests the Greek spirit: How could one think oneself the epitome of human civilisation if one is forced to resort to truly barbaric methods in order to prevail? While it is true that an allegation of anachronism would be hard to refute in this case, it seems nevertheless

permissible to speculate that the author may have been harbouring the seeds of the thoughts expressed by this quotation from 1849 much earlier.

Although Grillparzer's thoughts on nationalism do not appear in this explicit form until after 1848, literature—which we consider a seismograph for historical, political and social evolutions—can precociously manifest and incarnate phenomena and conflicts that are to come. By way of a certain view on Greek culture, *The Golden Fleece* can thus be seen to illustrate a form of cultural dominance entirely legitimate in Grillparzer's eyes, in line with his defence of German culture (Müller 1963: 76, 83), while at the same time demonstrating a degree of incapacity to live in harmony with other peoples and cultures. Indeed, more than just cultural diversity, what preoccupied Grillparzer was the question of a harmonious coexistence between the peoples of the Empire (Scheit 1989: 109). Paraphrasing the tribute rendered by Hugo von Hofmannsthal to his literary role model, we may concur with Gerald Stieg in saying: “Radically opposed both to aggressive nationalism and to German philosophical idealism, Grillparzer represents a sense of mediation, a ‘tolerant vitality’ that would allow ‘for a mixed population to live together in a shared homeland’” (Stieg 2013: 227). Since the 1820s, however, this coexistence under the aegis of the Habsburgs was potentially already under threat, both from the assertion of cultural otherness of the Slavic and Magyar peoples as well as from Germanic ethnocentrism.

In this context, the fact that the Austrian playwright aimed at maintaining a distant and critical relationship with the linguistic norm imposed by the northern “big brother,” attempting to oppose a properly Austrian writing to the German literary canon, is certainly not uninteresting (see Scheichl 1996). By way of the dualism opposing Prussian German and the German language of Austria, another form of linguistic differentiation plays out on the level of the historical context. Although Grillparzer did not manage to truly emancipate himself from the Weimar model, he was nevertheless highly sensitive to the difference between the two idioms. From this perspective, the deconstruction in his adaptation of the myth of Medea of the majority language (that is, blank verse) by a foreign minority cannot but strongly resonate with the issues of Austrian identity construction in his time. How indeed to define an original Austrian identity between the opposing poles of Germano-Prussian and Slavo-Magyar cultures?

It would certainly be an exaggeration and even downright misleading to fall prone to an oversimplified interpretation of Jason and his blank verse as representing Prussia, while

Medea and her free verse would symbolise the resistance to that domineering influence by incarnating a spirit of a multicultural Austria. Such a simplistic and erroneously allegorical view would utterly fail to do justice to the complexity of Grillparzer's work. Nevertheless, it seems irrefutable that the cultural and linguistic issues in the play echo this subsequently escalating conflict of nationalities and nationalisms that constituted a major preoccupation for the playwright. The tragic outcome of the play, the failure of dialogue and of cross-cultural mingling and blending, as embodied by the lovers Jason and Medea, could thus be read as the expression of Grillparzer's pessimism regarding the durability of the multicultural and multilingual model in Austria. In this context, the differentiation of idioms and the linguistic otherness depicted by the author, by means of playing with metric forms, can indeed be understood as a sensory translation of this issue—on the level of the materiality of dramatic language, where form and content, semantics and metrics, word and gesture continually complement one another (Kaiser 1961: 11ff).

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