

The *Hippodamia* Trilogy A Czech Adaptation of a Greek Myth¹

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At the end of the 19th century the Czech nation was a part of the multinational Austro-Hungarian monarchy. After a difficult process of national revival, which took almost the whole of the 19th century, the Czechs started to catch up with the other European nations in the field of literature, art and science. It was the National Theatre in Prague that became a symbol of maturity of the young Czech society and proof of its recently attained cultural standard. The funds necessary for its construction were collected from the contributions of thousands of ordinary people and literally the entire nation kept watch over them. In 1883 the National Theatre building was finally completed. At that time a number of original Czech dramas and operas were created, which were intended as the base of its repertoire.

Jaroslav Vrchlický, who is known mainly as a prolific poet,² also wrote approximately thirty dramas for the National Theatre. Among the most important is the *Hippodamia* trilogy, a melodrama in which the spoken word is accompanied by orchestral music composed for this purpose by Zdeněk Fibich. Both artists created a work of art that has remained a world-wide rarity to the present.

Zdeněk Fibich³ was an admirer of German composer Richard Wagner and his concept of *Hippodamia* was influenced by Wagner's theory of Gesamtkunstwerk. The music Fibich composed for *Hippodamia* is more than a musical coulisse. He wanted the music and the dramatic text to be linked as closely as possible. In his view, the poetic component of the melodrama had to be equally important to the musical component. In comparison with opera, melodrama allows the spoken text to be understood well. The actor in a melodrama must respect the rhythm of music in declamation but has sufficient freedom in his dramatic expression.⁴

The idea to create a national music drama, which would represent new Czech art, was promoted previously by Otakar Hostinský, an aestheticist and Fibich's friend. In 1885 he informed the Czech cultural community of the genre of melodrama and its history.⁵ However, even he was sceptical concerning the possibility to write and stage a full-length scenic

¹ A condensed version of this paper was presented at the 2nd Annual Postgraduate Symposium, Oxford, 26-27 June 2002 (*The Meeting of Cultures in Modern Performances of Greek Theatre*, organised by the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, University of Oxford, and the Department of Drama and Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London).

² Jaroslav Vrchlický (1853-1912) – an important poet, playwright and translator, the main representative of Neoromantic and Parnassian poetry in Czech literature of the 2nd half of the 19th century, a predecessor of the Decadent and Symbolist generation. As a translator he introduced into Czech literature not only important works of European literature (Dante, *Divina commedia*, Tasso, *Gerusalemme liberata*, etc.) but mainly modern European poetry. His anthologies of French, Italian and English poetry had a considerable influence on his contemporaries.

³ Zdeněk Fibich (1850-1900) – Czech music composer, one of the founders (together with B. Smetana and A. Dvořák) of Czech national music of the 2nd half of the 19th century, promoter of programme music.

⁴ The synthesis of spoken word and music was used already in Greek tragedy. However, it was French philosopher and musician Jean-Jacques Rousseau who invented melodrama for modern European culture. At the end of the 18th century, the genre of melodrama became famous thanks to Czech music composer Jiří Antonín Benda. He lived and worked mainly in Germany and wrote melodramas based on ancient stories (*Medea* and *Ariadne at Naxos*). Fibich, one of the most educated Czech composers, was well acquainted with his work.

⁵ O. Hostinský: *O melodramatu* [On melodrama], Lumír 13, 1885, pp. 55-57, 71-74.

melodrama. In spite of this scepticism, Fibich and Vrchlický wrote three full-length plays, which together formed the *Hippodamia* trilogy. The premiere of the first part, *The Courtship of Pelops* (1890)⁶, was a great success, which surprised everybody. Reviewers agreed that this mixture of poetry and music was not only acceptable and understandable but that the music component even amplified the effect of the poetic text. It was Fibich's music that made the drama moving and impressive. The view of the dramatic text itself differed depending on whether the reviewer belonged among the supporters of Neoromantic drama or among the promoters of new realistic tendencies. Cf. Ladecký: "One need not prove that the role of tragedy has ended, or that it is in its final mortal agonies. The writer himself has confessed the utter defeat of tragedy as a genre as he does not believe that the words themselves could excite anybody. Tragedy cannot walk due to decrepitude – let us give it a crutch, music, and it might hobble a few more years."⁷ In contrast, Novotný writes: "Classical beauty and monumental, breathtaking poetry radiate from the entire drama; however, the work does not create the impression of a frosty imitation. It shows the strength of a modern dramatic spirit, a wedding with antiquity in a beautiful manner that can scarcely be found among contemporary poets."⁸

Hippodamia also received international recognition. In 1892 the National Theatre took part in the world theatre exhibition in Vienna where *Hippodamia*, together with Smetana's *Dalibor* and *The Bartered Bride*, represented new Czech culture with a great success.

The play is also remarkable for its interpretation of the ancient myth of Pelops and Hippodamia. This myth exists in several versions. All versions agree that Oenomaus, the ruler of Pisae, refused to marry his daughter to any man and killed every suitor after defeating him in a chariot race. Pelops, the son of Tantalus, won the race and Hippodamia became his wife. However, tradition differs in the opinion as to the cause of Pelops' victory. According to Hyginus (*Fabulae* 84), Pelops bribed the charioteer Myrtilus to remove the linchpins from Oenomaus' chariot. Due to this trick, Pelops won the race and then murdered Myrtilus as a witness of his guilt. Before dying, both Oenomaus and Myrtilus laid curses upon Pelops and his descendants. Pausanias (*Description of Greece* VIII, 14) says that Myrtilus was not rewarded with gold but by the promise of a night with Hippodamia. According to Apollodoros (*Library* II, 3-9) it was Hippodamia herself who convinced Myrtilus to assist her in killing her father. Pindar presents a different version, more favourable to Pelops (*Olympian Odes* I): Pelops obtained winged horses from Poseidon, which helped him to win the race.

The myth of Pelops and Hippodamia was widespread in classical literature and art; hence the wide variance of the myth. The scene depicting them riding a chariot was a frequent motif of ancient vase paintings.⁹ The famous sculptures on the east pediment of the temple of Zeus (c. 460 BC) in Olympia depicted the heroes a few moments before the start of the race. Five centuries later Ovid refers to Hippodamia in his love elegy without evaluating or commenting the moral background of the race: the poet and his love watch the games in a circus and the allusion of Pelops' race figures as the love motif:

⁶ *The Courtship of Pelops* (Námluvy Pelopovy) was premiered on February 21, 1890, *The Atonement of Tantalus* (Smír Tantalův) on June 2, 1891, *Hippodamia's Death* (Smrt Hippodamie) on November 8, 1891.

⁷ J. Ladecký: *ref. Námluvy Pelopovy*, Česká Thalia 1890, pp. 79-80.

⁸ N. (= V. J. Novotný): *ref. Námluvy Pelopovy*. Hlas národa 1890, č. 50, 20. 1., p. 1.

⁹ Cf. *Lexicon iconographicum mythologiae classicae* V, Artemis Verlag, Zürich und München 1990, pp. 434-440.

“O, happy driver, whoe’er he be, that wins your favour! [...] Be that fortune mine, and when my coursers dash from the starting-chamber, with fearless heart will I tread the car and urge them on [...]. Have I caught sight of you as I career, I will stop, and the reins, let go from my hands, will drop. Yea, how near Pelops came to falling by Pisaeon spear while looking on thy face, Hippodamia! Yet he won, of course through the favour of his lady. May we owe our victories, all of us, to the favour our loves!”¹⁰

In extant Greek tragedies dealing with the house of Pelops we do not find much about Pelops and Hippodamia, while the life stories of their descendants are frequent (Aeschylus: *The Oresteia*; Sophocles: *Electra*;¹¹ Euripides: *Electra*, *Orestes*, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*; Seneca: *Thyestes*, *Agamemnon*). This is probably one of the reasons why the myth of Pelops and Hippodamia fell into oblivion for many centuries. Moreover, the myth was not included in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the main medieval source of Greek mythology. Whereas the story of Electra and Orestes is in favour by many European authors and playwrights starting in the 17th century (e.g. Crébillon: *Elèctre*; Voltaire: *Oreste*; Goethe: *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, Alfieri: *Oreste*; Leconte de Lisle: *Les Erinnyes*, Sartre: *Les Mouches*), one can hardly find any works concerning their ancestors, Pelops and Hippodamia.¹²

The *Hippodamia* trilogy is thus unique not only due to its melodramatic form, but also because it deals with a story which is an introduction to the horrific crimes of Atreides but which has been ignored by European literature for almost two thousand years. We do not know why Vrchlický chose this rather unknown myth for his dramatic adaptation. It is possible that articles in society magazines on archaeological excavations in Olympia (which had started shortly before) had intrigued the poet’s attention.¹³ In any case the myth captivated Vrchlický and became one of his sources of inspiration for several years.

The first part of the trilogy (*The Courtship of Pelops*, Námluvy Pelopovy) shows the race between Pelops and Oenomaus. The poet uses the Apollodoros version and lays the blame for Oenomaus’ death upon Hippodamia: she hinted to Myrtilus, who was in love with her, that she desired Pelops to win (and, consequently, her father to die), and Myrtilus prepared the deception. After learning of Hippodamia’s intrigue, Pelops was terrified and he threw Myrtilus into the sea in a fit of jealousy. This is the origin of a sequence of guilt and damnation which will trouble the house of Pelops, but also the beginning of the estrangement of the newly-married couple. The estrangement will gradually change into hatred, masked by jealousy.

The second part (*The Atonement of Tantalus*, Smír Tantalův) is fully a fruit of the poet’s imagination. Hippodamia with Pelops enter the house of Tantalus, she expels Pelops’ wife

¹⁰ Ovid, *Amores* III, 2, 7-17. In: Ovid, *Heroides and Amores*. Translated by G. Showerman. Harvard University Press 1986.

¹¹ Sophocles related the beginning of the curse on this family with Pelop’s ruse in the chariot race and the murder of Myrtilus (*Electra* 504-515).

¹² I have found only two operas, by A. Campra (1708) and by N. Jommelli (1755). Cf. Moormann, E. M., and Uitterhoeve, W.: *Lexikon der Antiken Gestalten Mit ihrem Fortleben in Kunst, Dichtung und Musik*. Stuttgart, Alfred Kröner Verlag 1995.

¹³ Fr. Velišský: *Novější objevy na poli archeologie klasické – III. Olympia* [Recent findings in the field of classical archaeology – Olympia], *Osvěta* 11, 1881, pp. 546-555, pp. 626-634, pp. 726-735; M. Tyrš: *Nález v Olympii* [Findings in Olympia], *Národní listy* 14. 3. 1877, č. 72, and M. Tyrš, *Vykopániny v Olympii* [Excavation in Olympia], *Národní listy* 24. 12. 1882, příl. k č. 341. The authors of these articles also mentioned the myth about Pelops and Hippodamia.

Axiocha and her barbarian wildness is confronted by Tantalus' blandness. Tantalus dies in atonement after saving Chrysippos, the child of Pelops and Axiocha, from the furious Hippodamia. The torments of Tantalus are interpreted symbolically as insupportable pangs of conscience which Tantalus, haunted by the phantoms of the Furies, has to sustain even during his earthly life and not in the Underworld. If we compare the repentance of Tantalus to similar scenes in the *Oresteia* and *Oedipus at Colonus*, we can see that it has Christian rather than Ancient features: his crime is atoned by an act of love and compassion. Cf. monologue of the dying Tantalus:

TANTALUS: Child of my son, Chrysippus I shall call you, atoner for my guilt! (*As he suddenly collapses, Pelops catches him in his arms.*) Atonement, yes, sudden peace comes to my breast, heav'n's wrath is now appeased. – O thanks for all, my son! The torment Niobe once augured for me I have undergone on earth, where peace and joy forever fled my grasp as longed-for water and sweet fruit evade the parched lips of the guilty! But now that I enter Hades, thronged with shades, those savage hags that dogged my every step are now become pale, peaceful figures, sweetly smiling, their serpent locks changed into lovely flowers. Something like music flows down to me from the heights, gloom of a sudden fades to a dim glow, which brightens and grows bigger, like the sun... Where'er I look is light – hail to all heaven's gods! (*He dies in Pelops' arms.*)¹⁴

The third part (*Hippodamia's Death*, Smrt Hippodamie) is set twenty years later. The plot is very complicated: Atreus and Thyestes, the perfidious sons of Hippodamia and Pelops, appear on the scene and following Hippodamia's instructions they murder their stepbrother Chrysippos. The elderly, blind Myrtilus returns to take his revenge: he discloses the truth about the chariot race between Pelops and Oenomaus and moreover, he sows in Pelops' mind seeds of doubt about Hippodamia's faithfulness. The cumulation of crimes, mutual hatred and impossibility of finding happiness in a life based on fraud and patricide leads to Hippodamia's suicide and to her malediction of the whole family.

The trilogy has a highly sophisticated composition: each part is a closed unit but with an open ending. The story culminates at the very end and the suicide of Hippodamia is the only way out of the labyrinth of guilt. The heroine takes responsibility for the crimes committed and arouses our compassion. However, the Aristotelian catharsis is weakened by her malediction and by her prediction of the future crimes of her descendants. This ending is an impressive memento since the contemporary, classically educated spectators were familiar with the further gloomy fate of the house of Pelops.

The thoughtful composition of the trilogy and the depth of thought stand out when we compare it to the original version of *Hippodamia's Death* from 1883.¹⁵ It is not only the plot but mainly the entire concept which make the two plays diametrically different. The original version from 1883 is about gradual revelation, the almost detective investigation of Pelops' former offence against Hippodamia, while their mutual crime (the murder of Hippodamia's father) is cast aside. In contrast, the final version deals with the consciousness of guilt and the pangs of conscience, which are destroying the main characters and their descendants. Tantalus, the father of Pelops, contributes to this curse due to his long-term guilt. The blame

¹⁴ CD booklet to *The Atonement of Tantalus*, Praha, Supraphon 1996, translated by Deryck Viney, p. 84.

¹⁵ Cf. D. Čadková, *Ke genezi Vrchlického Hippodamie* [On the Genesis of Vrchlický's Hippodamia], in: *Jaroslav Vrchlický and Josef Holeček (1853-2003). Sborník ke 150. výročí narození dvou protichůdců (památce prof. Alexandra Sticha)* [Jaroslav Vrchlický and Josef Holeček (1853-2003). Collection of papers to the 150th Anniversary of two Antagonists (In Memory of Prof. Alexander Stich)], Charles University in Prague, 2004, pp. 29-35. The original version was written in 1883 but it has been never published nor staged. In this version both Pelops and Hippodamia are guilty of the murder of Oenomaus. Twenty years later, Hippodamia learns that she was the price Pelops paid Myrtilus. Myrtilus, disguised as Pelops, spent the first night after the crime with her.

for Oenomaus' death can not be ascribed to a single, fully negative hero as in the original version but is divided among several characters. Each is guilty in a different way: Myrtilus committed the crime, Hippodamia wanted him to do it and Pelops was the cause of it. These characters analyse their parts in the crime. They lay the blame on somebody else at the beginning, then try to justify themselves, and finally accept it. The curse of the house of Tantalus, its inclination to the evil and vain efforts of certain characters to extricate themselves from it, runs throughout the trilogy. This concept may be influenced by contemporary Naturalism, which emphasised the role of heredity in human life. Fate here is not an abstract power destroying man from without as in the Greek tragedies but it is rooted directly in him, in his predisposition, passions and instincts.

Literary critics tend to class Vrchlický among the Parnassians or Neoromantics. It is obvious, however, that he was also influenced by other tendencies of the period, though he often criticised them. In the atmosphere of the end of the 19th century he could hardly avoid the influence of contemporary psychology, Naturalism and early Decadence. The character of Hippodamia agrees in many aspects with a typical heroine of the fin de siècle, with a demonic woman or a femme fatale. This woman, arousing admiration and love in men on the one hand, and fear and hatred on the other, frequently occurs in various forms in literature and art of this period.¹⁶ The dangerous and emancipated heroines of August Strindberg and the sensual and mysterious women in the paintings of Gustav Moreau or Dante Gabriel Rossetti are typical examples.

Among the various faces of Hippodamia we may find an independent Amazon in the first part of the trilogy, a cruel ruler over the fates of others in the second part, as well as an intriguer, scheming against Chrysippos in the third part. The scene in which Hippodamia kisses the bloody head of one of her decapitated suitors closely resembles a scene in Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, written four years later (1893):

HIPPODAMIA: O wretched, woeful head, your russet curls all stained with blood! Alas, you might have won a better dowry in this world! Those golden locks, now dark with blood, like sunny serpents might have wound round loving fingers in a game of love! Those lips, now leaden blue, what wealth of honey'd kisses have bestowed, what bliss, all vanished now! [...] Yet though yourself can kiss no more, who shall deny your being kissed? (*She kisses the head*) What ice and frost assail me from those lips! That sodden hair is redolent of death! And yet a wild affection grips my heart. O, do but open, azure eyes – now sadly sunk! [...] I freeze and shudder, death's bride that I am – ah, one more kiss, but one, and then we part forever!¹⁷

Salome was the most widespread manifestation of the femme fatale in European literature and art. Vrchlický was well acquainted with contemporary literature and undoubtedly knew Mallarmé's poem *Hérodiade* (1871) or Flaubert's novel *Hérodias* (1877, in *Trois contes*). After Moreau's famous painting *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* was exhibited in the Salon of 1876, Salome became a popular motif in art and literature (cf. J.-K. Huysmans, *A rebours*,

¹⁶ Cf. M. Dottin-Orsini: *Cette femme qu'ils disent fatale. Textes et images de la misogynie fin-de-siècle*. Paris, B. Grasset 1993; B. Dijkstra: *Les idoles de la perversité. Figures de la femme fatale dans la culture fin de siècle*. Paris, Seuil 1992.

¹⁷ CD booklet to *The Courtship of Pelops*, Praha, Supraphon 1996, translated by Deryck Viney, p. 15.

1884). In the course of time this topos of femme fatale degraded into another form, the vamp.¹⁸

The first attempts to perform Greek drama on the Czech scene date back to 1889 (*Antigone, Oedipus the King*). The *Hippodamia* trilogy, which was created at around the same time, was regarded as an imitation of Greek tragedy. The formal similarity between *Hippodamia* and Greek tragedy manifests itself in the form of the trilogy and in citing fragments of the tragedy *Oenomaus* by Sophocles and Euripides.¹⁹ In addition, the necromancy scene in the second part of the trilogy (Pelops summons Oenomaus from the Underworld) has a pattern in *The Odyssey* Book XI. On the other hand, the appearance of a chorus commenting upon the chariot race and exorcising the Furies is rather formal and has mainly a decorative role.

The relationship with Greek tragedy is evoked by the music of Fibich as well. At a time when Greek culture was still an unattainable ideal and knowledge of it was common, the melodrama could be understood as a continuation of the Greek tradition of declamation with musical accompaniment. This assumed link between the melodrama and classical antiquity seemed to be confirmed by the ancient topics of the first melodramas by Rousseau and Benda.

In writing *Hippodamia*, Vrchlický may have been influenced by already existing classical drama adaptations. He was probably familiar with *The Golden Fleece* trilogy of Grillparzer,²⁰ dealing with the conflict between two different worlds, the barbarian and the civilised. The main idea of *Hippodamia* is similar: it is a contrast between barbarism and Hellenism or, in a figurative sense, a contrast between the world of selfish passions on one hand and the world of reason, order and morale on the other.

The staging of this scenic melodrama is difficult since it places high demands on actors to be gifted with a sense of music and intonation of the spoken word. Spectators, who are generally less and less familiar with Greek mythology may have difficulty in following the plot and, moreover, are supposed to pay attention to a play lasting three long evenings. From the beginning of the 20th century until the end of the 1970s the melodrama was performed in the National Theatre of Prague almost continuously, with productions of Ladislav Boháč in the 60s and Karel Jernek in the 70s being the most successful (see the figures). It was also very popular on the local scenes. Since the 1970s its popularity has been declining.

The last production in the National Theatre in 2000 (only the third part was staged) was a failure (the play had a run of only five performances). To make the play more topical, the director set it in the time of its origin rather than in antiquity. Pelops and Hippodamia were conceived as parvenus who gained power through fraud and a base murder. The decision to stage only the third part was unfortunate. The spectators, who did not know the previous two parts, had trouble understanding the plot. As mentioned above, the trilogy has a complex composition and the individual parts are mutually interconnected. If only the third part of the trilogy is staged, the spectator is deprived of important meanings. The performance also

¹⁸ Note that Hippodamia also has certain features of a vamp: „I want to embrace you like a wild cat, a she tiger, suck with my kisses the very soul out from your body!“ (CD booklet to *The Atonement of Tantalus*, Praha, Supraphon 1996, translated by Deryck Viney, p. 28)

¹⁹ Vrchlický drew the reader's attention to citations of these fragments in the edition of *Hippodamia*.

²⁰ Austrian playwright Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872) was known but deliberately ignored in Czech patriotic circles for ideological reasons.

showed that the actors were no longer able to handle melodramatic roles. By its nature, melodrama is close to opera. It does not allow a natural acting style but it requires stylised gesture, diction and pathos in the true sense of the word.