

Renato Gabriele is an Italian poet, novelist and dramaturg. His prose works include the historical novels *Il comandante della caccia reale* (Genesi, 2008) and *Appena ieri eravamo felici* (Genesi, 2014), both of which were shortlisted for the Premio Campiello. His non-fiction writings include a study of the painter Normanno Soscia (*Mito e Metafora*, D'Arco Edizioni, 2007) and a collection of essays about the major Polish poets of the Nineteenth Century (*Sei saggi di poesia polacca*, Lithos Editrice, 2007). His most recent play, *Il Giardino di Mangrovie*, was performed in the Palladium Theatre in Rome in 2016; this play was originally published together with the *Medea Dismagata* ('Medea De-witched'), which is the focus of this interview for *Practitioners' Voices*.

This interview with Jessica Hughes took place at Renato Gabriele's home in Latina on April 6th 2016. Translated from the Italian by Jessica Hughes.

JH. Thank you very much for agreeing to this interview for *Practitioners' Voices*, Renato. The *Medea Dismagata* ('Medea De-witched') is your first dramatic work on a classical theme, but your earlier poetry is full of classical references – I'm thinking for instance of your collection *Capriccio con rovine* ('Capriccio with Ruins'), and *I viaggi di Penelope* ('Travels with Penelope'). How important has classical antiquity been to you and your work over the years?

RG. My relationship with antiquity has very deep roots. It goes back to my adolescence, and involves a complex sort of 'osmosis' between my imagination and the countryside, the landscape I grew up in. I was born near to the river Volturno in Campania, which is a place laden with ancient memories – it's the place where Hannibal made his famous descent into Southern Italy, and the site of the so-called 'idleness of Capua.' Classical poetry somehow brought me even closer to the ancient landscape – poems like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and his *Tristia*. These poems are very close to me, and they introduced me to a knowledge of the world of ancient stones. The poems and the physical remains of antiquity worked so closely together.... I suppose the landscape inspired me because of the sense of absence which ruins offer, the sense of loss which then finds completion again in the poetic word. So the poetry adds to the ruin, to loss, the human voice which is missing.

JH. Now, the *Medea Dismagata* develops the ancient myth of Medea from the point at which Medea has been thrown out of Athens by her husband Aegeus – so this is *after* the famous tragic episode where she kills her children by Jason. We meet her onboard a ship, with Medo (her son by Aegeus) as well as a crew, a nurse and two servant-girls. Where are they all going at that point – can you summarise for our readers?

RG. Medea is sailing in the direction of Colchis with the intention of reconquering the kingdom from her usurper uncle. And right from the beginning of the journey, it's very clear that she's had the burden of her past lifted from her shoulders, in some way – that she's full of hope for a new life with her son in Colchis, this wonderful place on the boundaries of the known world. This 'lightness of spirit' allows her to fall in love with the handsome helmsman of the ship (crucially, he does

not recognize who she is). So she's very much a new person, who wants to forget about all the suffering she has caused.

JH. I remember that between Act One and Act Two Medea takes off her heavy royal garments and puts on a simple red dress. Is that meant to symbolize her liberation, in some way?

RG. Yes that's right, although that happens at a point where things take a turn for the worse. You see, Medea is so giddy with her new-found liberty that she decides to play a joke on Oronte [the helmsman] while he's fishing with a harpoon from the side of the ship. My Medea has a sense of humour, but she still has her magical powers at the beginning of the play. So she makes Oronte catch this giant fish, but it's so big and powerful that one of the sailors ends up losing his leg, and Medea is forced to use her healing powers, which of course reveals her true nature to everyone.

JH. Revelation is a very strong theme in this play, isn't it? Because shortly after this episode we see Artemis and Apollo get on board under the guise of cloth merchants. Was it a challenge to depict the gods in front of a modern audience?

RG. Not really, no. I didn't have any problem in representing the ancient Olympian deities for a modern audience. It's important to underline that I wasn't striving for any kind of Euripidean authenticity in this play. I see this as a 'pop' opera – a completely contemporary 're-making' of the myth. But yes, the theme of revelation is pivotal, particularly insofar as it relates to the major shift between a culture of vendetta (as exemplified by Medea in her earlier life) and a gentler attitude of pardon, of forgiveness.

JH. I'd like to ask how far you drew on older Medeas in creating this play. Since you've mentioned growing up in Campania, I'm wondering whether you've been influenced by Mastriani's nineteenth-century Neapolitan version of the myth, *La Medea di Porta Medina*?

RG. Honestly, no. Not at all. I took the figure of Medea where Euripides left her, and made her my own. My play has actually got very little to do with any other versions – even that of Euripides. I'm not a bookworm – I don't do reams of research for my books. I knew a friend who was writing about Jesus so she went to Israel for a year! Instead, I work with the material inside me, like a miner bringing things to the surface. This is my creative process.

JH. To pick up your story again – there's an altercation between Medea and Artemis which results in Medea being stripped of her magic powers – hence the 'de-witching' of the title. Can you say a bit more about this? Why did Artemis 'punish' her? Do you see this as Medea's downfall, or as a further liberation?

RG. So to go back to what I was saying earlier about the culture of vendetta...essentially, Artemis is offended because Medea refuses to pursue her

vendetta. Medea has become tender, choosing forgiveness over revenge, and by doing this she has thrown the whole scaffolding of classical myth into crisis, into disarray. You see, in my play I took Medea from the Aegean sea, away from that horrible world of broken bodies. And I transported her to Colchis, a land where blue cats roam, and where horses are made pregnant by the wind. Sailing on these uncertain seas, Medea becomes tender, and she learns the modern sentiment of forgiveness – which was foreign to ancient religion. In a sense, my play hinges on this contrast, this clash between *vendetta*, which is a rule, and *forgiveness*, which is a choice. Forgiveness is a choice – there's no obligation. In antiquity, if you didn't practise vendetta then you were infamous – you didn't have any value as a human. Whereas forgiveness makes you more humane.

And as for the de-witching as a downfall...well, it can't fail to be traumatic, I think. In my play, the de-witching marks the beginning of the end for the 'Old World' of myths and heroes, the end of ancient fables. This is the price that we pay for progress.

JH. Straight after Medea's de-witching we get a choral ode, which closes the main part of the play before the Epilogue. What function does the Chorus have in your play? Why did you decide to stick with this ancient form?

RG. Again, like the inclusion of the divinities, this is simply a functional citation – something which grabs the audience's attention and makes it clear that we're talking about ancient Greece. It's like an author's gloss – my underlining of the theme which I've translated into the world of pop culture.

JH. Now, the Epilogue of the play is rather different from the preceding two acts, in that all the characters come on stage one-by-one, wearing modern clothes. Oronte wears jeans and t-shirt, the servant girls are dressed 'like prostitutes' (to quote the wording of the stage directions), while Medea is dressed as a businesswoman. They each give an update on what happened in their lives immediately after the de-witching. The whole effect is quite surprising and disorientating. Is that intentional?

RG. Very much so. The 'temporal collapse' is meant to be seen as a direct consequence of the de-witching of Medea that happened at the end of Act Two. It causes a kind of 'fracture' or 'caesura' in chronological time, but no corresponding fracture in the lives of the protagonists, and this is highly symbolic. You've noticed how this part is heavily shaped by contemporary 'pop' culture, and you can also see it in the use of the language, which in the first two acts is a sort of poetic, high language while in the Epilogue (but also in the Chorus) the language has a much more contemporary feel to it.

JH. Here, in Medea's final speech, is where we get the reference to the real historical figure of the 'Soapmaker of Correggio' [the *Saponificatrice di Correggio*, Leonarda Cianciulli]. It's a horrendous, sad story, which I guess will be more familiar to your Italian audiences than it was to me. I found the story in an online newspaper archive, and it made a chill run through me. Why did you choose this as a modern analogy with Medea?

RG. Actually, I started to write the Medea without knowing that I'd end up at the Soapmaker of Coreggio. I arrived at the Soapmaker when Medea had...*lived inside me* for a time. (This happens when I'm writing – the character becomes real, and lives inside me.) Medea brought her own luggage with her, and inside that luggage there was...horror. And then this memory was dredged up from my childhood. I must have been four or five years old when it happened. I didn't read it in the newspapers, but I remember the *horror* of hearing about a woman who chopped people to pieces, and who boiled them in a cauldron and turned them into biscuits and bars of soap.

I am assiduous in the recounting of horror. Blood for me isn't a simple material, a component of the human body. No – spilt blood contains a horror, something terrible. There's a similar childhood trauma recounted in my play *Giardino di mangrovie*, about the time I saw two young gypsy girls fighting, and one of them took a stone and broke the skull of the other one. Again I must have been four years old. I never forgot it, and now sixty years later I've transformed it into an emblematic form – a kind of *exemplum*. I have always had this sort of terrified stupor for the inhumane capacity of people to act in this terrible way. Many of my ideas are generated by an alarm that comes from horror. Now I have just a few years of life left, I would like to conserve my capacity to feel horror at evil, at inhumanity.

JH. Could I ask you about the future staging of the play? Have you any concrete ideas about the translating of the play onto the stage?

RG. Well, I certainly want it to be performed, and I think it's going to happen soon, although I'm too preoccupied with writing to think about it. I don't really know *how* to think about the practical aspects of the performance.

JH. Finally, Renato, I wondered if you could comment on the differences in writing about classical antiquity, compared with writing about other periods of history. One of your other works is the *Il comandante della caccia reale*, which is set in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies during the Nineteenth Century. What are the different challenges of reinventing myth, as opposed to more recent history?

RG. I live entirely within my writing, and my *daimon* – my inner voice – has multiple, protean forms. I'm reasonably familiar with older forms of our historic language, and I can also find my way along the rocky paths of invention. I'll just say this: every time I begin a new work, I see it as a challenge – an intellectual, poetic form of internal strife. This is my authentic mode of being.