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Medea and Ecological Disasters: The Play *Memories of Water* by Timothy Ochser for The New Riga Theatre

Mēdeja un ekoloģiskās katastrofas: Tima Oksera luga "Ūdens atmiņas" Jaunajam Rīgas teātrim

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Summary The rewriting and interpretation of the ancient plot offers diverse opportunities for exploration, particularly with the rise of ecological approaches and ecocriticism. The focus of the article is on the play *Memories of Water* written by the London-born author Timothy (also Tim) Ochser (1971–2017), who lived and worked also in the Baltics. The play is based on Euripides' *Medea*, and it was staged in 2008 at The New Riga Theatre (Riga, Latvia). In Ochser's play, Medea becomes a universal image, symbolizing the polluted waters of the world, while Jason represents the pollution caused by human activity. Ochser's play interprets three specific natural habitats and what happens in them through an ecological lens, which is related to human behavior patterns and the nature of consumer culture. Medea's memories are reimagined as memories of water, emphasizing the pivotal role of memory and the act of remembering in the play. Ochser's play raises questions about humanity's willingness and capacity to acknowledge and evaluate its ecological mistakes. The article examines the interpretation of Medea's character in Ochser's play, considering the contemporary context through an ecocritical reading.

Kopsavilkums Antīkā sižeta pārrakstīšana un interpretācija piedāvā daudzveidīgas izpētes iespējas, īpaši ekoloģisko pieeju un ekokritikas aktualizēšanās kontekstā. Raksta uzmanības centrā ir Londonā dzimušā autora Timotija (arī Tima) Oksera (1971–2017), kurš dzīvoja un strādāja arī Baltijā, luga "Ūdens atmiņas". Luga balstās Eurīpida traģēdijā "Mēdeja"; tā tika iestudēta 2008. gadā Jaunajā Rīgas teātrī (Rīga, Latvija). Oksera lugā Mēdeja kļūst par universālu tēlu, simbolizējot pasaules piesārņotos ūdeņus, savukārt Jāsons reprezentē piesārņojumu, ko izraisa cilvēka darbība. Oksera luga interpretē trīs konkrētus dabas areālus un to, kas tajos notiek, ekoloģiskā griezumā, kas saistāms ar cilvēka uzvedības modeļiem un patērētāju kultūras raksturu. Mēdejas atmiņas tiek pārveidotas par ūdens atmiņām, uzsverot atmiņu un atcerēšanās būtisko lomu lugā. Oksera luga uzdod jautājumus par cilvēces vēlmi un spēju apzināties un novērtēt savas ekoloģiskās kļūdas. Rakstā izvērtēta Oksera lugā rodamā Mēdejas tēla interpretācija, ņemot vērā mūsdienu kontekstu ekokritiskā lasījumā.

ἴτε νυν, χωρεῖθ᾽ ὡς τάχος εἴσω: / δῆλον ἀπ᾽ ἀρχῆς ἐξαιρόμενον /
νέφος οἰμωγῆς ὡς τάχ᾽ ἀνάψει / μείζονι θυμῷ
(Eur. *Med.* 105–108)

Now go, hurry inside as quickly as possible:
it is clear that a cloud of sorrow, rising from the source,
will very soon flare up with greater passion [1]

Introduction. Getting to Know the Play Within the context of Latvian theater and its interpretations of ancient plots, the play *Memories of Water*, based on motifs from Euripides' *Medea* (according to publicly available information from The New Riga Theatre and the theater program)[2] is remarkable for its uniqueness. It was written by Timothy (also Tim) Ochser (1971-2017),[3] a London-born author who also lived and worked in Latvia and Lithuania (Džārviss 2008). The play *Memories of Water* was staged in 2008 at The New Riga Theatre (Riga, Latvia) and directed by Elīna Cērpa. Originally written in English, it was translated into Latvian for the production by Ieva Kolmane (Latvian title: "Ūdens atmiņas").[4] Although this production of Ochser's play is recognized in the Latvian National Encyclopedia as an important contribution to eco-theater in Latvia (Balcare 2024), the full text does not appear to have been published, nor is a complete video recording of the performance available, according to the author's knowledge. A short video from the 2008 Latvian Television program *100 g kultūras* (100 Grams of Culture) is available. The program's topic is "Ecology and Culture", and one segment is dedicated to discussing the creation of the play *Memories of Water* at The New Riga Theatre. A study of materials related to the play,[5] along with a closer examination of texts written by Ochser,

1 All non-English quotations are translated by the author, unless otherwise indicated.

2 See Ūdens atmiņas. *(Memories of Water).* Jaunais Rīgas teātris. Izrādes. *(The New Riga Theatre. Performances).* Available: https://www.jrt.lv/izrades/udens-atminas/ [Accessed 18.02.2025]. The theater program is available at the Latvian National Museum of Literature and Music (Ūdens atmiņas 2008).

3 It should be noted that both the New Riga Theatre website and the theater program mention collaboration with Elita Kļaviņa in creating the text. (Ūdens atmiņas 2008: 3).

4 Ibid.

5 The author of the article expresses her sincere gratitude to the production director, Elīna Cērpa, for providing access to the full text of the play in both English and Latvian, as well as other related materials.

revealed a particularly fascinating picture. The plot of Ochser's novel *Boris Goes to the Supermarket* (Ochser 2014) incorporates a significant part of the play *Memories of Water*,[6] however, the title of the play is not mentioned in the novel. Therefore, without knowing the text of the play, it would be impossible to appreciate its presence in the novel. The integration of the play into the structure of the novel becomes possible when the novel's main characters attend a performance of *Memories of Water*. However, in the novel, the play is given a different title – *Medea Goes to the Supermarket* – creating a peculiar interplay with the novel's title and overarching theme; a domestic trip to the supermarket, which turns into a whirlwind of unexpected and absurd events.

The article aims to examine the interpretation of Medea's character in Ochser's play *Memories of Water*, with an evaluation of its contemporary context. Although interpretations of Medea's character and plot are diverse (e.g., Clauss, Johnston 1997, Bartel, Simon 2010, Taplin et al. 2000, Wetmore 2013, Cherbuliez 2020), Ochser's lesser-known play has the potential to reveal new interpretive dimensions in ecocritical readings and, to some extent, illuminate aspects of Latvian cultural life. In 2008, when the play was staged, ecological issues in Latvia received relatively limited attention; nevertheless, the production invites reflection on the local cultural currents of the time. That these currents resonate with aspects of ancient heritage is particularly striking.

Interpretation of Ancient Plots in the Context of Ecocriticism

The cyclical return to ancient plots and their diverse interpretations has become a well-established literary and cultural-historical practice. However, in the context of the reception of ancient plots,

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6 Thus, the section of the play *Memories of Water* included in the novel *Boris Goes to the Supermarket* is the only published part of the play's text currently known to the author. At the same time, it would not be considered a deliberate and independent publication of the play, but rather an instance of intertextual interaction – one text becoming part of another. Compared to Cērpa's material (the original English text), the portion of the play included in the novel shows only minor modifications – the general course of the plot has been preserved. The analysis in this article is based on the full text of Ochser's play from Cērpa's personal archive.

Meanwhile, it is also important to note that the idea of "water memory" originated in the 1980s with the controversial concept proposed by Jacques Benveniste (Thomas 2007). In the title of Ochser's play *Memories of Water*, we can see a reference to this concept. Moreover, the connection is reinforced by an explanatory note included in the theater program: "Very recently, scientists have discovered that water has memory stored within its molecules. The molecular structure is the alphabet of water, from which sentences can be formed about the origins of living beings" (Ūdens atmiņas 2008: 5). However, considering that in the novel *Boris Goes to the Supermarket* the play's title appears as *Medea Goes to the Supermarket*, the choice of title can be seen as both variable and contextual.

it is more important to emphasize that their interpretation inherently reflects the cultural realities of a given period, the prevailing worldview, and the global social challenges characteristic of that time. These factors encourage renewed engagement with ancient sources and their exploration from new or unconventional perspectives, thereby yielding ever-new insights. In this way, one may realize that the study of the reception of ancient cultural heritage is not so much concerned with isolated knowledge of the past, but rather serves as a reflection of the contemporary world. One of the pressing global challenges of the 21st century is the preservation of environmental resources and the protection of nature, concerns that naturally resonate in literature and literary theory (see, e.g., Zapf 2016). In the context of ancient cultural heritage research, this trend is evident in the rise and consolidation of ecocritical approaches (e.g., Bosak-Schroeder 2020, Cordovana, Chiai 2017, Cooper 2019, Schliephake 2016, 2020). Although ecocriticism as an approach is relatively recent, originating in the environmental protection movement of the 1960s, it has gained prominence in recent decades, particularly since the 1990s (Oppermann 2016, Rižijs 2013: 447).[7]

Considering ancient cultural heritage from an ecocritical perspective provides the necessary depth and long-term context for understanding human-environment interactions. Changes in natural cycles occur over extended periods, and the ability to discern continuities and differences in human-nature interactions – rooted in the earliest stages of European civilization – becomes particularly valuable. This idea is emphasized in the guiding principle of the Centre for Ancient Environmental Studies (University of St Andrews, UK, founded in 2020):

> We need to map out the long history of human-environment relations in all its complexity to understand how we got here and how we might prepare for the future.[8]

Thus, in the study of ancient texts, there is a dual perspective. On the one hand, scholars increasingly evaluate ancient literature from the perspective of ecocriticism (e.g., Armstrong 2019, Brockliss 2018, Saunders 2008). On the other hand, the literary process itself actively engages in the creation or reproduction of such texts, drawing on interpretations of ancient cultural heritage while simultaneously addressing, directly or indirectly, issues related to nature and ecology.

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7 For an overview of the concept of ecocriticism, its development, and various manifestations, see, e.g., Bergthaller 2013, Buell 1995, Glotfelty, Fromm 1996, Marland 2013. For information on the development of environmental humanities (EH) in the Latvian context, see Zariņa et al. 2022.

8 Available: https://caes.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/ [Accessed 13.02.2025].

Focusing specifically on performative texts and theater, Anne Carson's *Antigonick* (Carson 2012), positioned as a new translation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, provides a notable example. While the essence of Sophocles' tragedy is retained, the modern interpretation of the text plays a significant role. This raises questions about the nature of translation (at least in an academic sense) and the role of active participation in the creative process, which adds innovative elements. In this context, translation can also be understood metaphorically: as rendering an ancient text into a code that is comprehensible and relevant to contemporary audiences. In the context of human interaction with natural resources, Carson's text draws particular attention to the interpretation of the famous 'so-called' ode to man in Sophocles' *Antigone*.[9] In Carson's version, the Chorus sings: "many terribly quiet customers exist but none more / terribly quiet than Man" (Carson 2015: 14). Eric Dugdale, writing about the production of Carson's play directed by Martha Johnson at the Tjornhom-Nelson Theater (Augsburg College, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA), notes that during the dance performance, a spectator could observe "the vanity of human self-confidence" (Dugdale 2014). This observation can be further extended by considering the phenomenon of consumer culture, which, when interpreted through Sophocles' text, arguably becomes a timeless quintessence of human behavior.

The ecological context, however, becomes even more pronounced in Hollie McNish's adaptation of *Antigone*. In her character notes, McNish writes: "In my head Antigone hints at Vanessa Nakate, Malala, an older Greta Thunberg. She is very opinionated, believes deeply in her Gods (which are also here the Earth / The Environment) [..]" (McNish 2021: xxi). By comparing Antigone to prominent 21st century figures – such as Malala Yousafzai, a defender of women's rights, and environmental activists – McNish situates the interpretive context firmly within contemporary ethical ecological concerns.

It is thus unsurprising that Sophocles' *Antigone*, which addresses ethical dilemmas surrounding the interaction between divine authority and human power, has become in the 21st century a fertile ideological foundation for exploring the relationship between man and nature. More broadly, ancient tragedies invite reflection on the enduring interpretive potential of such texts. Their long-term vitality and universal relevance – especially in examining human character and mankind's place in the world – make them particularly compelling for modern adaptations.

In this context the work of Euripides is especially significant, as his plays often demonstrate profound engagement with diverse social issues (see, e.g., Kay 2022).

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9 Regarding "ode to man" in the context of staging the natural order see also Diamantakou 2022.

Aristide Tessitore notes: "The 'Medea' is Euripides' most famous play and perhaps his most enigmatic" (Tessitore 1991: 587). It is precisely this enigmatic quality that likely enabled the ideological core of Euripides' "Medea" to be transformed into *Memories of Water*, a play that foregrounds ecological issues.

Memories of Water: Plot, Characters and Three Natural Habitats

In Ochser's play *Memories of Water*, there are only three characters: Medea, Jason, and the Chorus. The Chorus, while fulfilling the function of a messenger and providing a voice from the sidelines, simultaneously serves as a metaphor for the globe. In the production directed by Elīna Cērpa, the Chorus was portrayed by an actor wearing a suit printed with a world map (costume design by Līga Šulce).[10] This visual interpretation aligns closely with the role of the Chorus in Ochser's play. Stage directions in the introduction state:

> The chorus is standing in front of Medea who is acting as a weather map with satellite images of swirling cloud formations projected onto her. The chorus points to Medea and faces the audience like a weatherman giving a weather bulletin. (Ochser [n.d.])

Because the timeline and locations shift rapidly, the Chorus functions as a landmark that anchors and organizes the plot. Furthermore, the Chorus serves as a genre element, allowing the audience to appreciate the connection to the roots of ancient Greek tragedy. In the play, Medea and Jason are portrayed as composite and abstract characters, where key associative themes – such as Jason's arrival in a foreign land, falling in love, Medea's abandonment, and the dichotomy of Self and Other[11]– take precedence over specific details and events.

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10 The available visual materials (the TV program *100 Grams of Culture* and photos from director Elīna Cērpa's personal archive) provide insight into the stage design of *Memories of Water* at The New Riga Theatre. Plastic products and waste are prominently incorporated into the scenic design (scenographer Māris Grosbahs), emphasizing the play's ecological message: the environment drowning in garbage as the millennia-old story unfolds. The Chorus, dressed in a suit with a world map (according to information from director Elīna Cērpa), further enhances this contrast. Nature and natural are set against the artificially created world in which humanity appears to be helplessly drowning. For details on the performance's creative team, see The New Riga Theatre webpage and the theater program (Ūdens atmiņas 2008: 3).

11 A review of ancient sources depicting the image of Medea, and their connection with contemporary interpretations, is explored by Edmund Cueva (2019). Cueva links ancient source material with examples from cinematography; however, it should be noted that these analogies can also extend to other contexts, such as theater.

The action unfolds through a series of encounters between Medea and Jason in varied settings. The first meeting occurs in a supermarket, after which the reader/spectator journeys through three significant natural habitats that, alongside Medea, form the thematic core of the play. This temporal and spatial progression is guided by Medea's memories, woven throughout the plot. In the play's introduction, Medea states:

> I remember everything. All things flow through me, reverberate in me, I bore it all. That's my nature, to bear the weight of things that can be borne, but my patience is at an end, my nature is at an end. (Ochser [n.d.])

Remembrance and the phrase "All things flow through me" serve as central motifs, seamlessly integrated throughout the text. In Ochser's play, Medea is metaphorically represented as water – a powerful force of nature and the source of life that creates, sustains and also destroys. As a timeless substance, water stores memories and stories, making strict attachment to a particular time and place unnecessary.

The first natural habitat that the reader encounters in the play is Lake Victoria in Africa, one of the world's most important freshwater reservoirs and a vital resource for millions of inhabitants. The scale of the area's ecological disaster is highlighted by the introduction of the Chorus, which states:

> (Clearing his throat) Ahem. Now we away to an enormous lake in Africa, which is singular of fish, ever since some idiot tipped a bucket of Nile perch into the water many years ago. Within no time at all the perch ate all the indigenous fish and some 210 kinds of cichlids died out. The cichlids had kept the water fresh by feeding on algae and waste, but after they died out eutrophication set in, and the perch were forced to feed on their own young[12] as there was nothing left for them to prey on. Fishermen who had lived off the lake for countless generations lost their livelihoods, as large fisheries were established on the lake shore that dealt only in the perch fish, exporting them in vast quantities to Europe and Japan, and the fisheries met the highest international hygiene standards, and a few lucky locals got to wear white frilly hats as they filleted the fish and threw the carcasses away, which went to the locals, who were suffering, call it poverty, call it destitution, call it misery, call it what you want, but now a cargo plane is coming, which will load up with so many fish that it will struggle to take off from the ground, but take off it will, and the fish will fly away, and become flying fish, nutritious fish, delicious fish, until they are fish no more, but something fishy, in the scheme of things. (Ochser [n.d.])

Amidst the backdrop of ecological disaster, human exploitation, and the depletion of natural resources described by the Chorus, the beautiful Medea lives by Lake Victoria, sits at an outdoor table, sips a cocktail and smokes. Jason arrives at

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12 *were forced to feed on their own young* – probably, in the context of the play eating (destroying) one's own kind (specifically children) might also be seen as an allusive reference to the myth of infanticidal Medea (see the section *Killing of Children: The Causality of Action*).

Lake Victoria as a pilot; as expected, he has come for the load of fish to be caught in the lake. On a related note, signs of a fish can also be seen in Medea: she opens her mouth like a fish, and, metaphorically, she may represent a local prostitute "fishing" for customers while simultaneously being the "catch" – a fish in her own right. This interpretation aligns with the ironically phrased remark of the Chorus: "something fishy, in the scheme of things". If Medea is metaphorically a catch, the earlier comments of the Chorus about Lake Victoria and the pilots coming for the catch echo, to some extent, the fate of the mythical Medea. Medea and Jason flirt and lust after each other, yet the mighty body of water – Lake Victoria – looms over everything. It is Medea who hums the legend of the creation of Lake Victoria in the form of a song:

> It is song about how the lake was made. One day there was beautiful young woman and she fall in love with good-looking pilot. Although he promise to take care of her and love her forever, he fly away one day and leave her all alone. Her heart is so broken that she cries for one whole year and all her tears fill up into lake. That is how lake was made. (Ochser [n.d.])

The story of water is interwoven with a memory story – a legend – which simultaneously encourages reflection on parallels with the Medea of antiquity (the arrival of a stranger, falling in love, and the heartbreak that follows). In this case, however, Medea's sufferings are connected with tears and, through them, are united with the element of water. Water thus becomes associated both with the sphere of human experience and with the cyclic force of repetition: the legend associatively duplicates events, evoking both the ancient myth and the contemporary scene depicted in the play. It becomes clear that the past does not remain in the past; it is destined to recur. Moreover, it is significant that water (Medea) possesses the ability to remember – a trait not as strongly characteristic of others:

> Medea: Will you remember my face after you fly away?
> Jason: No, I will forget your face very quickly. But I'll remember you in essence... (Ochser [n.d.]).

Jason's answer can likely be interpreted more broadly. Medea will remain, but only as a reflection – an abstract presence, perhaps even a myth – now reinterpreted in a contemporary context.

The next setting of the play shifts to the banks of the Daugava River, Latvia's river of destiny, where Medea becomes its personification.

The Chorus says:

> Drip by drip, fate is formed and deformed. Drip by drip, it flows and falters. Until even fate itself grows old, having circumnavigated the dictionary so many times. [..] And so drip by drip, a river of destiny is formed. [..] Is there anything more magnificent than this mighty river? Just look at her! Look at those fate-bearing curves! Look how gracefully she moves! [..] The river Daugava is the reason why this man has chosen to build his new house right here, on these very banks, for the view, what a view. (Ochser [n.d.])

The inclusion of the Daugava as one of the natural habitats resonates with Latvia's cultural code, representing both the beauty and majesty of nature and broader cultural values.[13] It is particularly striking that the role of the Daugava (and, by extension, Medea) in Jason's life is indirectly emphasized through the ringtone of Jason's phone: *Saule, Pērkons, Daugava*, a melody by the prominent Latvian composer Mārtiņš Brauns with lyrics by the poet Rainis, now considered a classic of Latvian culture (Zariņa [n.d.]).

Jason decides to build a house on the banks of the Daugava, an action that reveals the broader metaphorical function of his character. If Medea represents the Daugava River, then Jason can be seen as someone who settles by the river out of necessity. The Daugava embodies words and stories within itself, combining beauty, value, and its noble role as a river of destiny. Jason encounters Medea on the riverbank in the form of an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Medea seduces Jason, yet remains incomprehensible to him. Medea herself does not recognize her own beauty – the beauty that others, and Jason in particular, see in her. Through Medea's words, we perceive the story of the Daugava River, which, despite its tumultuous history, foreign conquests, and pollution, continues to bring happiness and a sense of idyll to people, allowing the past to fade into obscurity and leaving only the present. Medea reflects:

> I've been through a lot in my time. I've been abused by strange, unpronounceable, polysyllabic words gushing out of metallic mouths. I've been force-fed fetid effluent straight from the sewers. I've been physically deformed beyond recognition. I've had my name blackened in the crudest possible way. And still you keep telling me how beautiful I am. How blind can you be? How stupid? Tell me, how is the view from your window now? (Ochser [n.d.])

The voice of Medea-Daugava sounds offended and tragic; in her words and feelings, one can trace a history of experience, a memory of both recent and distant events, emerging as a rebuke for all wrongdoings. This reproach is heard by Jason – the representation of man in the play – who, without fully realizing it, is one of

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13 Cf. Significantly, the Daugava landscape is included in the Cultural Canon of Latvia. Its webpage about the Daugava River Landscape says:

The Daugava River and its primeval valley is one of the most impressive and grand nature's formations in Latvia. As are the landscapes of Daugava – the unique Bends of the Daugava River (Daugavas loki), its wide delta, picturesque views of the valley terraces and steep slopes, and the shores rich with forests, waterscapes of rapids or the slow and steady Daugava's flow. Also, territorially the Daugava River is one of the most important natural features, playing a huge role in the historical and political geography of the territory of Latvia. For a long time, Daugava has served as a bordering river in the political map of Latvia, as a corridor for trade and conquest, as a place for decisive fights and fortifications, as an icon for the Third Awakening in Latvia (the Singing Revolution). These historical and geographical aspects have made Daugava the significant and powerful symbol for the river of destiny (Likteņupe). (Zariņa [n.d.])

the perpetrators, a lover of Medea-Daugava's beauty in both literal and a figurative senses.

Moreover, the context of abuse echoes local events that occurred a year prior to the production of Ochser's play. In 2007, a diesel fuel leak occurred in the Daugava River as a result of a main pipeline accident in Belarus, spilling oil products into the environment.[14] Consequently, the play's content interacts indirectly with local realities, confirming that the text does not fully exist without extratextual conditions.

In the case of Lake Victoria, the extratextual reality that characterizes the natural disaster and its causes was presented by the Chorus, which can, in this instance, be likened to a stylized news reporter reporting from afar. In the case of the Daugava (Medea), the river itself tells of its fate and self-distortion, stating its causes in a more poetic manner, rather than a direct presentation employed by the Chorus at Lake Victoria. In this sense, Medea of Lake Victoria and Medea-Daugava are similar – their narration speaks through abstractions, functioning more as a story of memories than as a precise message claiming factual accuracy. It can be assumed that the words of the Daugava would have a much greater effect and credibility for the Latvian audience, considering the play was staged in Latvia. Furthermore, information related to the Daugava would be more familiar to the local audience, although local nature protection movements were far less tangible back in 2008.

The third setting where Medea and Jason meet is London. Medea is an immigrant who sells T-shirts with various slogans, while Jason is "an academic of reasonable ability who is fascinated by the cultural phenomenon of the T-shirt having observed over the years that more and more T-shirts convey textual messages" (Ochser [n.d.]). Jason notices the accent in Medea's speech and tries to find out where she is from:

> Medea: (Sighing). You know where Uzbekistan is, right?
>
> Jason: Of course.
>
> Medea: Well, I am a former Miss Uzbekistan.
>
> Jason: Wow. That is unusual. Where exactly are you from?
>
> Medea: I'm from a town called Muynak. You probably don't know it, do you? It used to be a really beautiful place. It was on the Aral Sea but then the sea disappeared. It literally died, and the town pretty much died with it. [..]
>
> Jason: What do you mean the sea disappeared? I'm sorry but seas don't just disappear.
>
> Medea: This one did. It was one of the world's largest inland seas. But water was diverted from the two main rivers that fed it – the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya – to irrigate huge cotton plantations. And within a few years, the sea started to recede. It shrank to half its size. Ochser ([n.d.])

14 E.g., an announcement by the Communication Department of the Ministry of the Environment (Vides ministrijas Komunikācijas nodaļa 2008).

The ecological disaster caused by human activity and the pursuit of short-term gain forces Medea to seek refuge in London. She is forced to leave her home to protect her life and secure her survival. In this case, the cause of the ecological problem is also linked to water management and disruptions in the natural order. Naturally curious, Jason attempts to learn more about Medea's story but receives a blunt response in the form of a T-shirt inscription: "DON'T ASK. IT'S A LONG STORY" (Ochser [n.d.]).

Indeed, the story is long, especially when considering the enduring viability of the Medea plot since ancient times.[15] In Ochser's play, the journey of Medea and Jason through time and space is unified by several elements: firstly, the constant presence, whether direct or indirect, of a body of water; secondly, ecological complications, resulting from human activity; thirdly, Medea's immersion in memory. Medea recalls the legend of the creation of Lake Victoria, the abuses inflicted upon the Daugava River, and, as an immigrant from Uzbekistan, her roots, her home, and the devastation of the Aral Sea.[16]

The progression of the play's action is also very significant: Medea and Jason set off for three natural areas from a very specific, yet seemingly mundane, starting point – a supermarket where they meet while shopping. This ordinary and domestic setting introduces the audience to the narrative in a way that demythologizes Medea, making her tangible, real, and relatable. The supermarket serves as a cornerstone of consumer culture, the feeder of contemporary life, and the starting point from which the characters embark on journeys to various natural habitats. This choice of setting is a unique and illuminating element that highlights the causal links in ecological issues.

A key aspect of the play lies in the dynamics of the action: the Chorus functions as a static unit, an ever-present observer and fact finder, ensuring that these facts are communicated to third parties – the audience, whether reading or watching. Medea, by contrast, can be understood as the keeper of the universal truth, the bearer of memory; she always knows more than Jason. Jason questions her,

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15 The mythical biography of Medea from antiquity, along with its key milestones and variations, is outlined, for instance, by Emma Griffiths, who, notably observes that "there was no canonical version of the story of Medea" (Griffiths 2006: 6).

16 It is also significant that the theater program mentions three natural habitats, providing factual background information on the ecological conditions of these regions. The paratext of the program outlines the environmental situation in Lake Victoria, the Aral Sea, and the Baltic Sea. Notably, the description of the Baltic Sea concludes with a reference to the River Daugava, i.e.: "Five rivers – the Neva, Daugava, Nemunas, Vistula, and Oder – are responsible for 50% of the total pollution in the Baltic Sea; the Daugava creates 80% of the pollution in the Gulf of Riga" (Ūdens atmiņas 2008: 11).

attempting to uncover answers and gain knowledge. In a sense, Jason both creates and consumes the stories carried and stored by Medea.

The play constantly evokes the feeling of déjà vu – revealed in the repeated encounters of Medea and Jason, and enhanced by extratextual factors – other texts and contexts that may arise in the audience's mind. Returning to the metaphorical framework, Medea embodies water, and Jason represents humanity. Medea accumulates the consequences of human actions; these imprints are preserved through each new cycle, altering the state of water – that is, polluting it – and fueling Medea's anger and desire for revenge, which at some point threatens to erupt.

It is nearly impossible to draw a direct comparison between the character system and the execution of action in Ochser's play and those in Euripides' *Medea*, which serves as its inspirational prototext; the differences in plot are substantial. The setting in front of Medea's house in Corinth, central to Euripides' tragedy, has no equivalent in Ochser's adaptation. Moreover, by employing a minimal three-character structure (Euripides' *Medea* features several additional figures alongside Medea and Jason– specifically, the Nurse, who, though not directly influencing the plot, introduces Medea's character and provides important context; the Tutor; Creon, the ruler of Corinth; Aegeus, the ruler of Athens; the Messenger; Medea and Jason's two sons; and a chorus of Corinthian women), Ochser creates a free space that facilitates the interplay of opposing images.

On one hand, this reduction eliminates elements that explicitly evoke the realia of antiquity. On the other hand, it maintains a deliberate connection to the genre of Greek tragedy, particularly through the inclusion of a chorus. However, unlike in Euripides' *Medea*, where the chorus consists of Corinthian wives, Ochser reimagines it in a more abstract, yet contextually grounded form.

Killing of Children: The Causality of Action

The depiction of the three natural habitats in Ochser's play exposes the wounds inflicted upon nature and intensifies the emotional tension – culminating, in the context of Medea's character, in what might be seen as the inevitable final act: killing. Research into the phenomenon of infanticide and the *Medea complex* raises questions about why mothers commit such acts, seeking to uncover the causes that provoke or may provoke, maternal impulses toward filicide (Tyminski 2014: 28). In Ochser's *Memories of Water*, the portrayal of this act of killing within the framework of ecological disaster carries profound symbolic significance. In the final part of the play, the Chorus warns that the water level is starting to rise dangerously, storms are raging, and it is necessary to seek refuge indoors:

> Severe flooding the latest in freak weather conditions causing utter chaos. The authorities are urging people to stay indoors as experts warn that more bad weather is on the way, in the shape of malevolent winds and malicious rain, and because people and animals are running amok. Several wild boar were earlier witnessed looting a supermarket, while in another shocking incident a car was gang-raped up the exhaust pipe by a herd of rampaging bulls. So stay in, as in as you possibly can, until it all blows over, and the floodwaters abate, and the storms subside, and the glaciers glaze over, and… (Ochser [n.d.])[17]

Jason searches for his children, but it becomes evident that they have been claimed – destroyed – by the forces of nature. The Chorus recognizes that, ultimately, water (Medea) had no other choice but to purify and save itself. This act of necessity serves both as an excuse and as a painfully rational justification for the killing. The focus shifts: it is no longer important that the victims are Jason's children. Water is the primordial mother of all living things – the giver of life – and all who perish are, in essence, Medea's children (children of water), or, more broadly, nature's children. In the face of nature, the human child appears powerless and insignificant. In this context, one may recall the words from Euripides' *Medea*, spoken by one of Medea's children in utter helplessness: "Oh, what shall I do? How can I escape my mother's hands?" (Eur. *Med.* 1271, tr. D. Kovacs). The line "expresses the vulnerability of children in front of the archetypal power of the mother, which can simultaneously generate and take life" (Sarmet 2016: 488).[18] In Ochser's interpretation, this

17 Cf. the lines from Euripides' *Medea*, where the Nurse urges the children to hurry into the house as their mother's anger rises: "Just as I said, dear children. Your mother is stirring up her feelings, stirring up her anger. Go quickly into the house [..]" (Eur. *Med.* 98–100, tr. D. Kovacs). Also see Eur. *Med.* 105–108.

18 Infanticide is one of the most controversial aspects of Medea's character, particularly in the context of Euripides' Medea. Griffiths, reconstructing Medea's mythical biography, writes: "The most famous narrative resumes when Jason marries the princess of Korinth, who is sometimes called Glauke or Kreousa. Outraged by his betrayal, Medea causes the death of the princess and exacts terrible revenge on Jason by killing her own children, leaving Jason childless. This is the famous version told by Euripides, but other variants of the myth give different reasons for the death of Medea's children which do not make her a deliberate child-killer." (Griffiths 2006: 8)

Similarly, Sohana Manzoor, analyzing the act of infanticide in the context of Euripides' tragedy, states: "Even though Euripides shows Medea to be guilty of infanticide, he also makes her one of the greatest heroines of all time. In other stories concerning Medea, her children are either killed by the goddess Hera, or by the relatives of Creon, which suggest that these children could not have survived the disastrous events surrounding them. Or, even if they had survived, they would not be allowed to achieve greatness – being merely the sons of Jason by a foreign mistress. By making Medea kill them, Euripides actually gives Medea the power to write her own story" (Manzoor 2019: 92).

It should be added, however, that alongside the scholarly view that Euripides' Medea introduced the element of infanticide as an innovation, there is also debate regarding the possibility that the poet borrowed this motif from the dramatist Neophron (Johnston 1997: 45). For further discussions of violence and infanticide in relation to the character of Medea, also see and cf., e.g., Corti 1998, Laufer 2021, Pucci 1980.

archetypal maternal power is transferred to the universal origins of all living things. Medea speaks of herself:

> There is so much of me, more than you can know, though still you speak of me, in clouds of silver lines, cycles of arrows, tides of time, oceans of turmoil, rivers of blood, gales of verbosity, floods of love, keep talking. But as I rise, you will fall. (Ochser [n.d.])

However, in Ochser's interpretation, within this cycle of giving and taking life, there emerges another killer – Jason. In the final scene, during a heated argument, than can be read as a struggle for survival resources, Jason kills the Chorus. In doing so, Jason (Man) destroys the Globe/the World (the Chorus), while the natural forces of the Globe, which sustain human existence and well-being, are compelled to destroy Man (Jason's children). The cycle thus comes full circle, returning to the point of origin. It is no coincidence that Ochser's Medea prophetically declares "I bore you, I killed you, I'll bear you again, I'll kill you again", Ochser [n.d.]). Creation and destruction become two inseparable aspects of the same process – global survival. In this light, Medea's act loses the moral weight of a crime, and becomes an instinctive act of self-preservation, whereas Jason's (human) action functions as the catalyst for destruction.

Another important nuance is that it is not within Jason's power to live without Medea, nor can he destroy her. His attempt to destroy nature – the globe – inevitably backfires and, ultimately, destroying him through the death of his children. The power, and the final word, belongs to Medea; without her, the existence of Jason (and his descendants) is impossible. At the same time, it must be noted that Medea, as an embodiment of Mother Nature and water, does not appear in her pure, untarnished primordial form, but in a deformed state. These deformations and distortions – resulting from human activity – lead to the self-destruction of humankind.

Medea has always been a complex figure since antiquity. On the one hand, she is a foreigner,[19] a barbarian woman – an aspect that is also particularly relevant in Ochser's play (Medea lives in a foreign land, has come from a foreign country or carries within her traces of foreignness and distance – sometimes even a mythical distance, a form of historical memory). On the other hand, she is a woman, whose primary role is to bear and create life, yet she acts against her own nature by

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19 Medea's foreignness was made explicit at the beginning of Euripides' *Medea* where the Nurse recalls the Argonauts' journey to Colchis in search of the Golden Fleece.

"Nurse: Would that the Argo had never winged its way to the land of Colchis through the dark blue Symplegades! Would that pine trees had never been felled in the glens of Mount Pelion and furnished oars for the hands of the heroes who at Pelias' command set forth in quest of the Golden Fleece! For then my lady Medea would not have sailed to the towers of Iolcus, her heart smitten with love for Jason [..]" (Eur. *Med.* 1–8, tr. D. Kovacs).

depriving her offspring of life. When applied to the distorted image of nature, an implicit idea emerges: a woman who destroys her offspring is herself deformed, that is, marked by a kind of pathology. However, it must be considered that the children themselves – that is, humankind – may be the initiators of this pathology.

Discussion and Conclusions

Considering Ochser's Medea from an ecocritical perspective, the play clearly exhibits the characteristics of an ecological – or ecologically oriented – text. The environment is not portrayed as static; rather, it possesses a sense of procedural continuity. In examining the relationship between nature and human activity, the play conveys an ethical stance marked by an unmistakable tone of warning. Moreover, nature's interests are timeless – eternal – and therefore cannot be ignored. Nature in the play is not merely a secondary background element, if only because its personified force is made explicitly visible in Medea's character.[20]

The continuity of environmental processes reflects a shift from untamed, unaltered nature of the past (existing in memory) to a domesticated and subjugated nature (also preserved in memory), which ultimately undergoes destructive deformation.[21] Nature, embodied in the image of Medea, faces existential threats and destruction, and seeks to adapt and function in a transformed state. In Ochser's play, Medea represents water – and more broadly, the environment – after suffering harm, effectively portraying a woman struggling to survive with the means available to her. This includes emigration to another country as a means of survival, which, on one hand, links ecological crises to broader issues of human migration and, on the other hand, recalls the ancient Medea, a barbarian woman among the Greeks, who likewise had to adapt to unfamiliar and challenging circumstances.

The play's ideological orientation may also be interpreted through the lens of ecofeminist thought. As Marians Rižijs writes: "Metaphors such as 'mother nature' serve two purposes: naturalizing women and feminizing nature. This means that nature is imagined as a woman whose primary task is reproduction and nurture" (Rižijs 2013: 451). Within this framework, Medea's centrality in the context of infanticide provokes particularly intense reflection. If Ochser's text is read as an apology for Medea's act of infanticide – portraying it as an ecologically motivated action, a form of self-defense, or more precisely, an act of nature's self-preservation –

20 For a discussion on ecological content criteria, see Buell 1995.

21 Cf. Buell 2001.

then the depiction of natural processes gains a long-term causal and explanatory dimension.

Medea, representing both the female and the feminine, assumes the maternal function of nature, whereas Jason, embodying the male and the masculine, reflects the subjugating forces of civilization.[22] At the same time, Medea's representation as nature is not a universal abstraction; the play emphasizes a specific element: water, a fundamental condition for life that sustains all living things. In this way, the opposition between nature/water and humanity becomes less rigid, establishing a common denominator that lends the play a nuanced ideological subtext. As Astrida Neimanis suggests, through water as a shared component of human bodies, an ideological and corporeal connection is established between humans and the environment. Specifically, water, as a common denominator, "suggest(s) that the human is always more-than-human. Our wateriness verifies this, both materially and conceptually" (Neimanis 2017: 2).[23] In the case of Medea, however, this manifestation operates on an even deeper, more transcendental level. With the invocation of Medea's character in the play, the context acquires an additional layer of associative cultural meaning.

The rationale for including Medea in the play remains open to interpretation. It can be argued that her character underscores an action profoundly unnatural for a mother – turning against her offspring and committing infanticide. A particular trait from ancient Greek tragedy, specifically Euripides' *Medea*, is selected and reimagined in a new context, while other aspects of the character that do not serve the play's narrative are omitted. For example, although Medea is traditionally known as a descendant of Helios, evoking primary associations with fire,[24] Ochser takes

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22 The association of the feminine with nature and natural resources, as well as elements of the Mother Earth concept, appears across various cultural and historical contexts. These include, but are not limited to, interpretations of interactions between the feminine and masculine, analyses of the impact of civilization's products on nature and the environment, and the positioning of the feminine dimension within possible paradigms of the concept of nature and the natural, as reflected in societal behaviors, responses, etc (see and cf., e.g., Gaard 2015; Leach 2007; Merchant 1980; Moore 2008; Plesa 2019; Urbanowicz 1998).

23 A wide range of research focusing on models of coexistence between water and dry land is gaining increasing prominence in the humanities. These ideas and trends can be compared to the broader developments in the so-called field of *blue humanities*, which is becoming more relevant. (Oppermann 2023).

24 Cf., e.g., Eur. *Med.* 746–747, 376–380, 1186–1187, 1198–1199. See also Luschnig 2007.

an entirely different path: Medea is represented through water.[25] Like fire, water can nurture and sustain life, but it can also destroy. More importantly, water is presented as a common denominator of all living things, making it an especially fitting choice in the context of the play.

The ancient Greek tragedy, indicated as the source of inspiration for the play, lingers in the background as a distinctive form of cultural memory. It subtly permeates the play, inviting reflection on associative parallels, despite the entirely transformed temporal and spatial framework and the altered thematic scope. The ancient plot, present in the background, may also play tricks with memory – the audience no longer fully remembers how the original story unfolded, or why it could not unfold in the same way. In this sense, Ochser's play resonates with the idea of the mobility of the classics (e.g., Greenwood 2016). On one hand, the recognizability of the classics renders them universal and omnipresent; on the other hand, diverse readings emerge, enriched by locally significant contexts or personal interpretations. Consequently, local and personal perspectives acquire additional cultural layers, creating a complex network of ideas.

At a 2008 press meeting, Ochser stated: "[..] In the story of water, he sees the common tragedy of humanity, so he contrasts Medea and Jason, two expressive opposing forces, in his drama work" (Adamaite 2008). In Ochser's interpretation, the characters of Medea and Jason are conceptually expanded: they move from the individual and specific to the global and universal – Medea representing water and natural forces, Jason representing humanity. Meanwhile, the model of ancient Greek tragedy becomes a framework for human tragedy in general. Ochser's play transforms a cultural-historical and textual unit, giving it a contemporary context and enriching the ancient plot with problems characteristic of modern life. These issues, while modern in expression, are linked to archetypal beginnings. Ecological concerns, in particular, underscore long-standing questions about human-nature relations and humanity's interaction with the surrounding world. All of these issues, despite shifts in emphasis, have remained at the centre of human civilization since time immemorial. From an ecocritical perspective, this approach can be understood as "a response to the need for a humanistic understanding of our relationship with the natural world" (Burima, Rinkeviča 2020: 5).

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25 However, it should be noted that Medea has also been examined through the lens of other natural elements (fire, water, earth, and air, Musurillo 1966: 66). Musurillo writes about Euripides' *Medea*: "For the element of water we have the sea, an image that is so prevalent in the play chiefly because of the voyage of the Argo that brought Medea and Jason together. It was Themis, protectress of oaths, who transported Medea across the seas to Greece [..]". (Musurillo 1966: 67). Although the presence of water is significant, it is not an element that defines the essence of the character.

Memory and recollection play a crucial role in Ochser's play. Just as the ancient plot must be recalled, the audience is called to recognize and evaluate humanity's past mistakes. In the context of ecological disasters, this functions as a warning not to forget environmental missteps. It is telling that Medea asks Jason whether he remembers her face; he admits he will not. Concrete events may fade, leaving only abstract memory – but abstraction alone is insufficient. The story of Medea-water unfolds across multiple, very specific locations, highlighting humanity's repeated errors while keeping Medea and her reckoning with her offspring as a persistent background. Human mistakes accumulate over time, inevitably leading to death.

In Ochser's interpretation the plot develops a distinct system of meaning, assigning special functions to each character – Medea, Jason, and the Chorus. Significantly, "the creators of the play [meaning, the creators of the theatrical performance] combined their emotional poetic impulses with the facts of ecological studies" (Adamaite 2008). This fusion produces poetic and intertextual material that incorporates elements of popular nature journalism, which both references and evokes real ecological facts. In its dramatic elevation Ochser's play resonates with the destructive tendencies of consumer culture and engages both local environmental concerns in Latvia (where the play was staged) and geographically distant ecological contexts. Throughout, the unifying theme remains the exploitation of nature.

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