

THE KINGDOM OF ARMENIA AS THE LAST BASTION OF HELLENISM

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1. Preface

Being brought to your attention is “Artavasdes and Cleopatra”, a tragedy written by Hovhannes Nerzetian, a contemporary writer. It is based on historically authentic events and characters. The author has managed to present a human tragedy in a manner which is timeless. We encounter the universality of the human race interpreted in a particular way.

Nerzetian’s work deeply penetrates the theme of human existence.

The soul and personality, however meritorious of victory, are eventually subject to a judgment directed at re-evaluating human values.

The words spoken by Artavasdes, king of Armenia, express ideas and philosophical speculations about life which are inherent not only to the period in which he lived, with 20 centuries separating us from that time, but also to relationships between the individual and society, between empires and conquered or defeated states, between rulers and subjects.

This work by H. Nerzetian is a literary creation that meets the most rigorous standards.

2. “Man’s substance has not changed from Homer to Hovhannes”¹

A tragedy in verse is a rare phenomenon in literature these days. Most authors who have accomplished it are no more. Since then, there have been many stormy events on the theatrical stage and many stars have shone there. However, not many have been able to recite a short poetic line as opposed to an awkward soliloquy. The reasons are quite obvious.

Hovannes Nerzetian, nevertheless, has disregarded these reasons. In his play, Nerzetian furthermore, expects the reader to be familiar with the story, otherwise he will encounter passages which are not easily interpreted.

When writing a tragedy about Artavasdes and Cleopatra, Nerzetian had in mind their Shakespearian counterparts, Antony and Cleopatra. He did so, quite openly by borrowing several personae; the companions-in-arms of the Roman triumvir and attendants of the Egyptian Queen retain their original names.

The events described in the Armenian story precede those of Shakespeare. The characters of the Roman and the Egyptian depicted by Shakespeare are very similar

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to the characters by Nerzetian: Antony is impulsive and unpredictable, Cleopatra is deeper, more farseeing, but also more passionate.

Let us briefly review the chronological outline followed by the author. In the middle of the 1st century B.C. the strongest states in Europe, North Africa and Anterior Asia, were Rome, Armenia and Parthia, which were continually engaged in conflicts or alliances with one another [1]. Rome would join Armenia against Parthia, Parthia would align with Armenia against Rome, Rome and Parthia against Armenia.

The Triumvirate of Caesar, Pompey and Crassus was formed in Rome, while Artavasdes II (55 – 34), son of Tigran II the Great (95 – 55), sat on the Armenian throne. Artavasdes II was an educated man who, according to Plutarch [2], composed tragedies and wrote speeches and historic treatises in Greek.

In 53 B.C. Crassus's troops were bitterly defeated by the Parthians who had just renewed their alliance with the Armenians, Crassus having been killed during the battle. The initial confrontation between the two triumvirs was won by Caesar who was then murdered by a group of conspirators led by Brutus. Internecine wars and civil unrest led to the Second Triumvirate in Rome created by Caesar's supporters Antony and Lepidus, as well as Octavian, grand-nephew of the murdered dictator. Meanwhile, the Parthian-Armenian army, expanding its sphere of influence, reached Syria and Palestine. To strengthen the connection with Octavian, Antony married his sister Octavia, but abandoned her in favor of Cleopatra, Caesar's unofficial widow. Prior to the inevitable union with Octavian, Antony secured the support of Artavasdes and attacked Parthia, but was defeated. Laying the blame for this failure on his former ally, the Romans moved upon Armenia, captured Artavasdes, paraded him in golden shackles in Alexandria, but failed to make him kneel before Cleopatra.

The timeline highlighted in the play covers approximately twenty years. Neither the scenic action nor the scenic time develop in a way that is smooth or consecutive, they are only indicated by odd images, which are however closely strung together with a taut thread. In actual fact, each small knot in this thread – Suren carrying Crassus's head, Fraat's intrigues, the death of Prince Pakor, the triumphant march in Alexandria – all these key episodes are based on historical data. The only invention by the author is the encounter between Cleopatra and Artavasdes, her love for him, their correspondence, etc. Why was this choice made?

According to historians [3-4], Artavasdes was executed three years after his refusal to kneel before the Queen of Egypt. Why not at once? For what reason did Cleopatra keep the King behind bars dispatching him only in view of her own death? These unanswered questions provide ample opportunity for the imagination. It is an opportunity that Nerzetian has certainly not wasted.

Artavasdes' execution is, incidentally, outside the story. The viewer will know nothing of it. A necessary condition for a tragedy must be the death of the principal characters. Nerzetian, however, closes the curtain while all the personae are alive. The situation is nonetheless tragic, since the playwright does not emphasize the physical existence of the characters, but rather their spiritual well-being. At the end, the main characters lose everything that has given meaning to their lives. Cleopatra values love above all, but there is no hope for her love. For Artavasdes, the highest value is freedom, but he is a prisoner in chains.

The unfulfilled romance between the Armenian King and the Queen of Egypt is on the sidelines of the play.

Evident in the foreground, are the everlasting philosophical dilemmas: Duty and Self-love, Integrity and Perfidy, Man and Power, the Fatherland and the World. My initial note was that no one writes dramas in verse these days. They are more or less obsolete. But curiously enough, the outmoded form does not prevent the author from conveying a modern vision.

The feeling that remains is that the old-time characters resolve problems that are quite up-to-date. The current values of those issues are obviously tinged with the shadows of today. The scenes with common people represent a theater of the absurd in the purest sense of the word. The scenes carry a double meaning. Not only do they reduce the level of reasoning, they bring it down to grassroots by turning them inside out at the same time. Not that the propensity toward the absurd is displayed by clowns, beggars and the mob; the absurdist virus oftentimes adheres to real personalities. The irony inherent in the many dialogues in “Artavasdes and Cleopatra” is generated by what is happening today. The clash of intonations in the form of differing times display additional effects.

An interesting idea has emerged as the focal point in the play, one that is extremely important. Dissolving like salt and having never been formulated, it may be lost forever. Meanwhile, having manifested itself in the opening scene, this idea is alive in many meaningful dialogues, its presence often being quite marginal. It surfaces in the concluding soliloquy by Artavasdes. The idea is that of **BLINDSMANSHIP**, that is, a man’s inability to discern either another man or the essential events that take place in the world around him; we wander in darkness committing one error after another. On the face of it, having expressed this malady at the very start, the playwright seems to abandon it. But it is not so. And the clowns, too, with their comical jesting, and the lunatics mimicking the powerful, illustrate the idea in different ways. In some places the author shows his idea as a transparent metaphor, as with a chain of people symbolizing humanity and leading the way, is a blind man...

In conclusion, with all the fiery images presented throughout the play, its characters are not masked people wearing old clothes. The images produced by Nerzetian are living characters rather than death masks.

Notes

- ¹ Nerzetian Hovhannes – “SAMVEL” – act one, page 5

References

- [1] STRABO, *The Geography*, XI, pp. 13,14
 [2] PLUTARCH, *Parallel Lives*, cap. XIX , XXII, XXXIII, XXXVII, XXXVIII, L
 [3] FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *The Jewish War or Judean War*, I
 [4] GAIUS CORNELIUS TACITUS, *Histories*, II

Biographical notes

Georgi Koubatian, graduated from the State University of Nizhny Novgorod (Russia), is the author of several books of poetry, literary criticism and publicist articles. Moreover, he is the Russian translator of many works of Armenian writers, including Hovhannes Nerzetian’s play “Artavazd and Cleopatra”.