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FROM THE SMALL VILLAGE  
COMMUNITY  
TO THE INACCESSIBLE  
LAND OF POSTMODERNISM:  
**PAPDIAMANTI'S  
*THE MURDERESS* AND  
H. MÜLLER'S *MEDEA MATERIAL***

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**Abstract:** Medea follows a dangerous and destructive course, accompanied by the element of death and horror. She kills her brother and children for Jason's love. She has been described as having committed infanticide, a brutal murderess, rebellious and mentally disturbed. Her personality is scary as well as fascinating. She travels through the centuries and meets important creators who retell her story from their own perspective. Centuries later, Alexandros Papadiamantis would write about his own murderess, infanticide and psychologically unstable woman, Hadoula Fragogiannou, who, living in unbearable oppression, does the unthinkable. She kills little girls to redeem them. Half a century later, Heiner Müller, in the context of a new theatrical convention, that of metadramatic theatre, presents Medea as a material cause, as an active agent, who takes fate into her own hands. The title of *Medea Material* is indicative of how he perceives Euripides' myth. How do the two female figures of Medea and Fragogiannou converse? What are the points where their stories meet or diverge?

**Keywords:** Euripides, *Medea*; Alexandros Papadiamantis, *The Murderess*; Heiner Müller, *Medea Material*; intertextuality, critical reception.

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## Introduction

A myth is a narrative, a set of elements structured in a sequence. They are the dreams of the world (Buxton, 2005, p. 18) and the voice of the collective unconscious. The myth deals with the great human problems. Myths are the ones that tell us "who we are and where we are" (Campbell, J., 1991, p. 31).

All known and great myths function as archetypes. They provide the right tools for systematizing human thinking. They give behavioral lessons that people over the centuries accept, embrace or reject (Kosmopoulou, 2017, p. 15).

The myth of Medea, the controversial female figure who has received many adjectives to characterize her—infanticide, cheated partner, witch, stranger, excluded, strange or mentally disturbed—has been a source of inspiration for many creators, thus acquiring her own advocates, apologists or doubters (Diamantakou, 2018, p. 42).

Medea, whose name is etymologically attributed to the verb *maedome* ("to care", "to think", but also *archo*, "to dominate", according to *A Greek-English Lexicon*, Liddell-Scott, 1901) was introduced to the Athenian public in 431 BC, when the great master of Attic drama Euripides presented his work.

Euripides has received many characterizations over the centuries. Thus, he was characterized as a revolutionary, innovator, harbinger of a new era but, at the same time, an atheist, intransigent and misogynistic (Markantonatos, 2020, p. 1).

Many scholars study his work, trying to highlight the striking contrasts and aspects of his personality and their possible reflections in the Euripidian drama. The barbaric (foreign) Medea betrayed her family in order to help her lover and later husband Jason. Thus, she will follow a road of no return. She discovers that her husband is breaking their vows of eternal loyalty, since now he desires another woman: Creusa, the Greek daughter of King Creon. Her thirst for revenge overwhelms her. She ends up killing their two children to get revenge on him. Medea is a witch. She has been taught the secrets of magic by the dark Goddess Hecate:

ἦν Ἐκάτη περίαλλα θεὰ δάε τεργήσασθαι  
 φάρμαχ', ὅσ' ἤπειρός τε φύει καὶ νήχστον ὕδωρ (Apollonius Rhodius, 3.1128).  
 [(whom the goddess Hecate) taught to handle magic herbs with  
 exceeding skill all that the land and flowing waters produce]

Euripides presents us a woman with a complex and fascinating character, who is completely alien and deviates from the usual standards of female presence of the time of the great tragedian. Knox will comment that, as other “stranger” characters, Medea possesses a worthwhile wisdom and thought and plays a role similar to that of the male heroes of ancient tragedy (Knox, 1979, pp. 297-320). However, anger repeatedly shows its power, subdues her, and, in the end, it emerges stronger than any logic or wisdom that characterizes the heroine (Lesky, 2003, p. 72).

Certainly, thoughts and opinions about the archetypal figure of Medea and her actions are inexhaustible, but the figure of the female witch, murderess and infanticide that transcends social conventions and evokes collective sentiment is exceptionally rare. Another woman bearing the same characteristics is presented in the context of Modern Greek literature of the early 20th century—*The Murderess* Hadoula or otherwise Fragogiannou<sup>1</sup>—a sixty-year-old Skiathian midwife, and witch at the same time, who feels suffocated due to social restrictions and poverty, struggles with her own dead ends, traumas and demons and finally does the unthinkable—she kills a large number of young girls. The creator of this important social novel—as he described it—is Alexandros Papadiamantis<sup>2</sup>, one of the leading representatives of the literary generation of the 1880s.

1 The name “Fragogianou” derives from her lineage, specifically her descent from the Franks. The second part of the name, “Gianou”, originates from the name “Giannis”, possibly referring to her father or husband. The identity of women during that time was fundamentally tied to the male members of their family.

2 *Alexandros Papadiamantis* was born in 1851 in Skiathos. An unruly and restless spirit from a young age, Alexandros attends different schools. He graduated in 1874 from Varvakeio, then resided on Mount Athos, and then enrolled in the Philosophical School of the University of Athens. He settled permanently in Athens in 1887, where he followed the political and social developments that led, among other things, to the emergence of a new type of scholar who developed a new relationship with the reading public.

This decade is the moment when Greeks, more than ever, are faced with the dilemma of turning to the West or highlighting and exploiting healthy traditions. On the political scene, the two partners Trikoupis and Diligiannis face each other. The showdown is between reforms and extreme nationalist politics. Literature could not help but follow the facts. At the time, the literary currents that dominated were mainly realism and naturalism (Vitti, 2003, p. 293) but also symbolism and Parnassism.

The original themes chosen by the writers of the 1880s generation are characterized by the density of folklore motifs, the exploitation of the past, but also by the presence and promotion of family life, with its real current everyday problems. And also the turn to the science of folklore by Nikolaos Politis in search of a purely national peculiarity (Moulas, 1993, p. 85).

Thus, what happens in the homeland becomes an inexhaustible source of inspiration for the writers of the time, as it is presented as the closest place for them to draw experiences. It is in this context that Papdiamantis lives and creates his realistic short stories focused mainly on the problems and concerns of the community of his island, Skiathos.

More than half a century after *The Murderess* and the generation of the 1880s, we are transported to Europe, where a strong current of questioning normalities with pervasive tendencies to deconstruct stereotypes can be traced back to the late 1960s. Theorists such as Bourdieu, Derrida, Barthes and others constitute a core of revisionist tendencies that stand critically against colonialism, racism, and gender inequalities (Patsalidis, 2012, p. 1).

With this in mind, the plot, the characters and the theatrical texts that talk about political and social changes lead many young creators in the 1960s to turn to ancient Greek drama (Campbell, P.A., 2008, p. 84).

The new form of theatre that is emerging is based on the abolition of traditional theatrical conventions and the departure from “absolute drama”. Drama, as defined by Aristotle, is characterized by the dominance of dialogue between the protagonists, interpersonal communication and the exclusion of everything external from the dramatic world, including the dramatist and the spectators, condemned to silent observation; it is also defined by the unfolding of time as a linear sequence in the present but also the respect of the three units of

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An important factor that favored this change is the relationship between the daily printed press and literature. Papdiamantis begins his writing career with the historical novel, but soon turns to the realistic short story, by publishing in newspapers and magazines. Although his writings are mostly intended for an urban readership, as he himself lives in Athens for a long time, he never becomes a bourgeois, and he will never break his bond with the province. Thus, the small society of his island is interpreted through the urban Athenian perspective. The value of his literary work is indisputable and lies in the fact that his themes concern issues that preoccupy people until today (Kopidakis, 2003, p. 229; Politis, 1998, p. 205; Farinos- Malamatari, 2014, p. 26-50).

time, of place and action. Hans-Thies Lehmann's study of post-drama theatre has apparently attempted to answer a vital need for a comprehensive theory that articulates the relationship between drama and the "no longer" dramatic forms of theatre that emerged in the 1970s (Lehmann, 2006, p. 1). Post-dramatic theatre, according to the term used by Lehmann, is a new theatrical paradigm that focuses on the deconstruction of characters and, based on postmodern theories of subjectivity, emphasizes the construction of meanings and subjects, while it has the power to destabilize and question normative ones, in contrast to the theatre of imitation, which remains trapped in the representation and imitation of the prevailing ideology<sup>3</sup>. In other words, the new form of theatre advocated for by Lehmann is not simply a mimetic transcription of action and dialogue, on the contrary, it focuses on the theatricality itself and assumes a destructive role within the play itself (Pefanis, 2007, p. 253).

The important German playwright Heiner Müller, with his performance *Medea Material* (1982-1983), which is based on the author's trilogy *Despoiled Shore Medeamaterial Landscape with Argonauts* introduces us to the interior of the post-dramatic theatrical convention, presenting his own Medea as a symbol of non-passive resistance against contemporary problems and social violence and injustice.

In light of the above, and having as a starting point the archetypal figure of Medea, this article aims to showcase a comparative analysis of the texts of the important authors Papadiamantis (*The Murderess*) and Müller (*Medea Material*) using as main tools the theories of intertextuality, perception and gender studies.

### ***Fragogiannou and Medea Material: Bodies of No Importance***

The titles of the two texts are of considerable interest for the principle of our analysis. Papadiamantis calls his work *The Murderess*. It is immediately apparent that the central axis of his work is a woman... who kills. But who and why?

Müller, on the other hand, chooses the title *Medea Material*. At first the archetypal figure of the infanticide Medea comes forth, and, then, the word "material". What is the relation between the two?

*The Murderess* is written in 1903. History unfolds in a specific place and time – at the beginning of the 20th century, in Skiathos. The central figure is a sixty-year old woman, Hadoula Fragogiannou who is reflecting on her life, and realizes that she has always been a slave – of her parents initially, then of her husband and later of her children and grandchildren.

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<sup>3</sup> On the deconstruction of the theatre of imitation, see: Diamond, E. (1997) *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and the Theatre*, London and New York: Routledge.

*Ήταν περί το πρώτον λάλημα του πετεινού, οπότε οι αναμνήσεις έρχονται εν είδει φαντασμάτων. Αφού την υπάνδρευσαν και την «εκοκκούλωσαν» [...] η νεόνυμφος μετά του συζύγου της εκατοίκησεν στο σπίτι της ανδραδελφής της (Papadiamantis, 2011, p. 28)*  
 [It was about the first cry of the rooster, so the memories come in the form of ghosts. After they had married her and “decapitated” her [...] the newlywed with her husband lived in her husband’s sister house.]<sup>4</sup>

Wanting to save little girls from the fate that haunts all women, she comes up with the idea of killing them. So she commits a series of murders—infanticides. In the end, hunted by the authorities, she will end her life by jumping off a cliff into the sea. Hadoula, among others, is both a midwife and a *pseudo-doctor*, showing a remarkable knowledge of herbs and *mantzounia*<sup>5</sup>:

*Έδιδε βότανα, έκανε κηραλοιφάς, εξετέλει εντριβάς, θεράπευε την βασκανίαν, παρεσκεύαζε φάρμακα διά τας πασχούσας (Papadiamantis, 2011, p. 37).*  
 [She gave herbs, made beeswax ointments, performed rubbing, cured torture, prepared medicines for sufferers.]

Her contact with wildlife—mountains, forests—and her ability to move around this space comfortably, without feeling fear, reinforces Hadoula’s identity as a woman who had power, ruled nature and was close to the magical element:

*εξήρχετο εις τους αγρούς, ανέβαινε εις τα όρη, διέτρεχε φάραγγας, κοιλάδας και ρεύματα, έφαχνε να εύρη τα βότανα, όσα αυτή ε γνώριζε —την αγριοκρομμύδα, την δρακοντιά, το τρίμερο και άλλ ακόμη— (Papadiamantis, 2011, p. 37)*  
 [She went out into the fields, climbed the mountains, ran through gorges, valleys and streams, searched for herbs as much as she knew—the wild onion, the dragonfish, the tripartite and more—]

For Papadiamantis, women can be carriers of both good and evil. In his novels, his heroines are governed by mysterious powers, are a personification of ancient spirits, they know magic and sorcery. They radiate charm, but also fear as they can manipulate chthonic forces (idem, p. 37). They are magical light-hearted creatures: *ως «αλαφροΐσκιωτη» που ήτον, Αλαφροΐσκιωτη! τω όντι* (idem) [...as “moonstruck” she was, “Moonstruck” indeed!].

4 Our translation for all the fragments to be quoted.

5 “Mantzounia” refers to traditional herbal remedies or concoctions, often made from a combination of natural ingredients such as herbs, spices, and honey. These preparations have been historically used in various cultures, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern regions, for their purported medicinal or therapeutic properties, reflecting a blend of empirical knowledge and cultural practices in traditional medicine.

The relationship between women and nature is explainable if we consider that the female body and its functions are directly involved with birth and life. Subsequently, the female physiology (e.g. menstruation) place women in social roles that are inferior to those of men. Women's psychology also seems to be closer to nature. Hysteria and mental outbursts were phenomena that were directly related to the female gender and testified, according to many, to the uncontrollable womanhood (Ortner, 1997, pp. 73-75).

Knowing the art of midwifery and herbs, Hadoula helps women give birth to their children, but sometimes helps them “get rid of” them by giving them herbs or using other practices. Violence inflicted on women's bodies in order to induce a miscarriage through self-abortion due to an unwanted pregnancy or “illegal” in other cases, was common practice. The fear and anxiety of women about unwanted pregnancies leads them to adopt practices of suicide. Self-abortion using various “tools” such as wire, needle, or even bird feathers dipped in strange herbs is essentially an act of suicide (Rich, 1983, p. 383), that was sometimes entrusted to a third person, usually an elderly woman. Fragogiannou lives close to the pain to which the female body is subjected. But this pain is inherent in the woman's fate. It follows girls from their birth.

*Το θηγάτριον είχαν έλθει άρρωστον εις τον κόσμον [...] Από την κοιλίαν της μητρός του, η φθορά το είχε ακολουθήσει (Paradiamantis, 2011, p. 27).*

[The baby daughter has come sick into the world [...] From her mother's womb, decay followed her.]



*Φόνισσα/Fonissa/The Murderess* (2023), film directed by: Eva Nathena; Fragogiannou: actress Karyofyllia Karabeti.

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Source: <https://www.athensvoice.gr/politismos/kinimatografos/863049/fonissa-monadiki-provoli-sto-mikro-theatro-arhaias-epidaourou-to-savvato-108/>

We witness how the female body is subjected to violence and pain, but so is the female soul. There are many images in the text that show us the horror of physical and verbal violence tolerated by women from their male family members<sup>6</sup>:

*Τότε τυφλός (ο Μούρος) [...] ορμήσας εκτύπησεν την αδελφήν του εις το πλευρόν  
όπισθεν κατά τη δεξιάν μασχάλη.[...]*

*Η Αμέρσα άφηκε σπαρακτικήν κραυγή. (Paradiamantis, 2011, p. 44)*

[Then blind (Murus) [...] rushed and struck his sister in the side behind  
the right armpit. [...] Amersa let out a heartbreaking cry.]

*Και ο γαμβρός της (Φραγκογιαννούς) είχε πει ρακί με το παραπάνω μετά το δείπνο  
επειδή είχε πει αρκετά ωμιλούσε μέσα στον ύπνο του.*

[And the son-in-law of Fragoiannous, drunk raki more than enough  
after dinner ... drunk so much that he was talking in his sleep.]

Hearing the coughing baby, he cries: “Shut up!”

We observe here that both women’s bodies and women’s embodied selves are under constant oppression and subjected to violence in order to conform, to remain “acceptable” and “ethical”. In order to become “moral”, the individual follows a series of practices or self-management techniques that will allow him to modify and transform himself, in order to meet specific social and cultural criteria (Foucault, 2003, p. 19).

The female body thus becomes a field over which powers clash. The struggle between the prevailing morality and order and the will of the subject himself, which here takes second place.

Müller’s *Medea* does not place us in a specific place or timeline, since his theatre can only be tied to a natural process. The faces and actions of Müller’s heroes, like those of myth, take place in the context of natural history. They appear and then disappear, just as they do in nature. In this way, the action is dissolved in favor of the incidents. Thus, the action appears as a changing landscape (Lehmann 2006, p. 81).

Even theatrical expression in post-dramatic theatre bears elements of ideological decay and thus stands in stark contrast to the cohesion and unity that characterizes classical theatre. In this context, gestures, body movements and stillness are themselves transformed into objects – sources of meaning. So the body is not a matter incapable of transformation, but it is redefined and re-transformed (Barba, 2004, p. 157-158).

6 . Euripides also speaks of the sufferings of the female body in *Medea*: “First of all, we must, spending money and money, buy a husband and have him as master of our bodies.” (Euripides: pp. 231-234).

After all, it is Medea's material that interests us, not her actions. Material for Müller are all those elements that Euripides' *Medea* carries and can be used depending on the era of the play, its ideologies and its problems. Müller's *Medea* is material for thought. After all, the author uses ancient Greek myths as a raw material, as examples of collective experiences (Müller, 1997, p. 14). The play presents three characters: Medea, Jason and Medea's nanny. Three dramatic characters but the most iconic is Medea and the moment of her famous long monologue. Medea addresses Jason saying:

*Τούτο το κορμί δεν σημαίνει  
Τίποτε πια για σένα. Θέλεις να πεις το αίμα του Ιάσων.* (Müller, 1997, p. 38)  
[This body means nothing to you anymore?  
You want to drink its blood, Jason?]

*«Ας έμεινα το ζώο που ήμουνα  
προτού ένας άντρας με κάνει γυναίκα του  
Μήδεια η βάρβαρη τώρα απορριγμένη»  
«Ήμουν η αγελάδα για άρμεγμα, τώρα υποπόδιό σας»* (Müller, 1997, p. 41)  
[“Let me remain the animal I was  
before a man made me his wife  
Medea the barbarian now rejected.”  
“I was the milking cow, now your footstool!”.]

Müller, through Medea's mouth, highlights here women's oppression and devaluation, the power of men over women's bodies and characters, the betrayal they suffer from a male-dominated society that has marginalized them. A society that treats them as worthless persons and meaningless bodies. Within this framework, gender not only functions as a rule of who matters, but is also part of the authoritarian discourse that produces concepts, differentiates them, delimits and controls them (Butler, 1993, p. 2). Müller seems to use the face of Medea to denounce female enslavement and oppression by the dominant man/conqueror (Müller, 1997, p. 16).

### **Φόνος , θάνατος , λύτρωση/Murder, death, redemption**

*The Murderess* constantly ponders the suffering and hardship that fate has in store for girls. She begins to murder them indiscriminately. Her purpose is to redeem them, as she will say. It is no coincidence that little girls here follow the same fate as their mothers. Growing up, they too will become subjects of violence (Tomara Sideris & Sideris, 1986, p. 87).

Hadoula, contemplating all this, is led to the explosion. She kills little girls believing she is resisting fate. But this resistance comes at a cost both socially and psychologically:

*Της Φραγκογιαννούς άρχισε πράγματι να ψηλώνει ο νους της!  
Είχε παραλογίσει επί τέλους. Έκλινεν επί του λίκνου έχωσε τους δυο μακρούς  
σκληρούς δακτύλους στο στόμα του μικρού διά να το «σκάση»*  
(Papadiamantis, 2011, p. 52)

[Fragogiannous' mind really started to get taller! (started to lose her mind)  
[She had reached the limits of her endurance and had finally lost her mind.  
She leaned on the cradle, inserted her two long hard fingers into the  
little one's mouth to smother her (the baby girl).]

Perhaps it is society itself that killed the little girls and not Fragogiannou? Could *The Murderess* be read as a manifesto of oppressed women? Papadiamantis surprises the reader not only with his knowledge of female psychology, but mainly by writing a woman-centered novel. The ever-present problem of the condition of women and everything related to it returned to the fore with his creation. He seems to talk about the problems of women through Hadoulas' mouth, as another feminist (Gasouka, 1998, p. 228).

Specifically, the recent Greek film adaptation of *The Murderess*, premiered in November 2023, directed by Eva Nathena and starring the important actress Karyophyllia Karabeti, without any intention of modernizing the discourse, the narrative or the perspective of things, brought back to the fore mental and physical abuse, blockages and despair of women. The film received significant accolades, both domestically and internationally. Indicatively, at the 18th Greek Film Festival in London, the film won 6 awards such as Best Film, Director and Best Actress. Subsequently, at the 18th Los Angeles Film Festival, the director won a Special Jury Award for Best Director, while Karyofyllia Karabeti won the Special Jury Award for Best Performance.

From the other perspective, in his *Medea*, Müller clearly shows how the social establishment that tramples on women's values and rights makes them appear barbarian, alien, it distances them from themselves and their desires.

*Ιάσων: Τί ήσουν πριν;*  
**M: Ήμουν η Μήδεια** (Müller, 1997, p. 38)  
[Jason: What were you before?  
**Medea : I was Medea!**]

Medea is a foreigner, she is barbaric and she will have the strength to answer Jason and bring her counterarguments for each of his statements. Don't we all feel foreigners at some point? Abandoned? Rejected? We don't admire the murderess, but the woman that has courage to defend herself.

Medea is then the mirror, our image, or, in Müller's words:

*Ο ακρωτηριασμένος ήρωας, (είναι κάτι που) μπορεί να συμβεί στον καθένα,  
δε σημαίνει τίποτα όμως. (Müller, 1997, p. 31)*

[The mutilated hero (it's something that) can happen to anyone,  
but it doesn't mean anything.]

### **Conclusions**

The archetypal figure of Medea travels through the centuries. Creators throughout the ages transform her myth or draw material from her personality. The two important creators, Papadiamantis and Müller, converse with Euripides' *Medea* in order to narrate their own reflections on the "women's question".

Although there are no clear references to the relationship of his work with the myth of Medea, Papadiamantis, however, as a genuine feminist, denounces unknowingly (?), through the mouth and actions of Fragogiannou, social injustice and oppression against women of his time. He uses the extreme practice of infanticide, like Euripides, to make her denunciation heard louder. Isn't it social norms and imperatives that killed those girls? Müller, always influenced, interested and inspired by his context, uses Medea as a "material" that he adapts in his spatial and temporal frame (German Democratic Republic) to denounce social, racial and gender inequality.



Murderesses—Group Exhibition | State of Concept Athens |  
25 September-16 November 2024

State of Concept presented the “Murderesses” exhibition by Konstantina Melachrinou and Liana Fokianaki with the participation of Eleni Karakou, Markella Ksilogiannopoulou, Miammy, Malvina Panagiotidi, Eva Papamargariti<sup>7</sup>.

Installation Images by Stathis Mamalakis

All the works by Malvina Panagiotidi © the artist, Courtesy the artist and The Breeder.

Source: <https://elculture.com/exhibition/murderesses-women-violence-and-myth-rethinking-the-gender-stereotypes/>

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<sup>7</sup> “The five artists participating in the exhibition use oral narratives of violence, spells, sexual practices, caustic campaigns, medical trolley tables, and hybrid creatures that make us rethink the gender stereotypes. The narratives through their works strive to exorcise patriarchy [...] as it is experienced daily 121 years after Papadiamantis’ novel. Each work transforms violence and seeks to shed light on the darkness of the past for a brighter future where gender violence no longer exists.” (elculture.com)

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**Filmography:**

1. *Fonissa/The Murderess* (2023) Directed by Eva Nathena. [Film]. Writer: Katerina Bei; Stars: Karyofyllia Karabeti, Maria Protopappa, Elena Topalidou, Penelope Tsilika, Georgianna Dallara. Production: Tanweer Productions.
2. *I Fonissa/The Murderess* (1974) Directed by Kostas Ferris. [Film]. Writer: Alexandros Papadiamantis (novel), Costas Ferris and Dimos Theos (screenplay). Stars: Maria Alkeou, Dora Lutinaki, Dimitris Poulikakos. Producer: Milli Gregou-Delipetrou.
3. *I Fonissa/The Murderess* (1993) Directed by Angelos Kovotsos. [Film]. Writer: Alexandros Papadiamantis (novel), Vaso Hekimoglou (screenplay). Stars: Toula Stathpolou, Anthi Andreopoulou, Thalia Argyriou. Producer: Nikos Pilavios.

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