

Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy
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“Leave it to a playwright who has been dead for 2,400 years to jolt Broadway out of its dramatic doldrums” begins a recent *New York Times* review (December 4, 1998) of a British *Electra* by Sophocles starring Zoe Wanamaker and Claire Bloom. This fall the *Times* has repeatedly remarked on the “deluge” of Greek tragedy in the 1998-99 theater season: the National Theater of Greece’s *Medea*, Joanne Akalaitis’ *The Iphigeneia Cycle* (a double bill that combines Euripides’ two Iphigeneia plays), a revival of Andrei Serban’s famous *Fragments of a Greek Trilogy*, and a four-and-a-half-hour adaptation of the *Oedipus Rex* were announced at the start of the season. Off-off Broadway versions will inevitably follow. The Brooklyn Academy of Music even hosted a dance/theatre piece based on the Eleusinian Mysteries. ¹ The Classic Stage Company, an off-Broadway theater group devoted to performance and adaptation of Western classics, currently receives more scripts that re-work Greek tragedy than any other category of drama. ²

From a global perspective, New York is simply reflecting a trend set by important modern playwrights and directors worldwide. Greek drama now occupies a regular place in the London theater season. In the past twenty years, acclaimed productions have been mounted not only in Europe but also in Japan, India, and Africa. Translations are even beginning to proliferate in China, occasionally with unexpected results. A recent Chinese translator of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* referred to all the Greek gods generically as Apollo, since he could count on his audience’s ability to recognize this name from the United States space program. ³ The Greek theater festival at Delphi has played host to many of these performances, with the result that, for example, the Greek National Theater’s 1998 performance of *Medea* showed a significant Japanese influence. ⁴ What accounts for this current revival of Greek drama and what are its implications for us as scholars and teachers of Classics?

As classicists, we tend to do a good deal of soul-searching about our field’s relevance for and interest to an increasingly diverse modern audience. The reception of the Classics in popular culture, from Disney’s *Hercules* to New Age goddess worship, might at times disconcert some of us, but for contemporary artists, from poets and playwrights to film-makers and composers, our texts are certainly neither dead nor viewed as the property of dead white males. Feminist classical scholars have wrung their hands over the difficulties of handling the misogynistic elements of Greek drama in a classroom, but this has not excluded from the stage feminist versions of Greek drama such as the French director Ariane Minouchkine’s famous *Les Atrides* (a tetralogy including the *Iphigeneia at Aulis* and the *Oresteia*), the English poet Tony Harrison’s *Medea: A Sex War Opera*, or the American playwright and actress Ellen McLaughlin’s *Iphigeneia and Other Daughters*. ⁵ Despite debate over the Western canon in United States universities, Rita Dove, the African-American poet who recently served as poet laureate of the United States, published in 1994 (revised 1996) *The Darker Face of the Earth*, an adaptation of *Oedipus Rex* set in the pre-civil-war South. An Alaskan *Yup’ik Antigone* that toured Europe in 1985 included a shaman Tiresias and tribal masks and music that enhanced the heroine’s

stirring defense of traditional Inuit mores. ⁶

Moreover, many of these performances and adaptations have served as a meeting ground for an immense variety of theatrical traditions. The use of mask, dance, music, ritual, and poetry in Eastern and other world theater traditions not only overlaps with that of Greek tragedy, but offers an opportunity to bring to life those aspects of ancient drama that are alien to the tradition of Western nineteenth-century realism. Thus, although world theater has generally had a pervasive influence on contemporary avant-garde theater in the West, it develops a special resonance in the case of Greek tragedy. Minouchkine's *Les Atrides*, for example, drew on multiple Asian traditions including Indian Kathakali and Japanese Kabuki and Noh. The Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi brought Noh drama into confrontation with Western mores and traditions in his *Bacchae*, *Trojan Women*, and *Clytemnestra*. The African Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka's *The Bacchae: A Communion Rite* drew on a variety of popular musical and stage traditions including African-American gospel and British vaudeville and mayday dances. The white authors and producers of the much-revived *The Gospel at Colonus* brought Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* alive as a sermon performed by African-American singers and actors before an African-American gospel chorus. The adaptation enabled the directors to create both a powerful relation between chorus and actors/singers and a community with a genuine stake in the action.

Scholarship on the performance and adaptation of Greek tragedy in the United States has begun to appear in the *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, *Classical and Modern Literature*, *Arion*, the electronic journal *Didaskalia*, and a range of theater journals as well as in books by such pioneering scholars as Marianthe Colakis, Karelisa Hartigan, and, pre-eminently, Marianne McDonald. ⁷ The recent *Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* contains two important articles on the topic. ⁸ The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, established by Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin at Oxford, will contain materials from over the past five hundred years. Only a few of us have begun to teach courses that respond to this exciting contemporary phenomenon, probably due to the dearth of audio-visual materials and the distance from urban centers where many of these plays have been performed. Having done so myself, however, I would like not only to recommend the experiment to the rest of you, but to reflect for the remainder of this lecture on some possible reasons why I think these texts have made such an impact on the modern stage and what these performances bring to our own understanding and teaching of the originals.

Greek tragedy permits a political response to irresolvable, extreme situations without being crudely topical. Set in an imaginary past that offers few specifics in the way of setting or physical description, it is also amenable to both changes of venue and to multi-racial casting. We are all familiar with the ways it has been used in this century as a facade for staging political protest or a response to a particular political climate. *Antigone*, for example, served this purpose in occupied France during World War II, in Ireland during the 1980s, and as the centerpiece of Athol Fugard's South African prison play, *The Island*. ⁹ Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* is the play that has been most translated in modern China, perhaps due to the heroic resistance of its divine hero to a

tyrannical regime. ¹⁰

Moreover, every contemporary performance of a Greek tragedy must be an adaptation of sorts, since it involves translation of the language of the original and confronts a profound ignorance of the music, dance, and theatrical context that conditioned its first presentation. This impediment removes the barrier of language and theatrical convention faced, for example, in the case of Shakespearean drama, and thus invites experimentation. As the contemporary Indian director Suresh Awasthi put it in his discussion of using Indian theater techniques to perform a Tamil *Antigone*, “The very claim of authority, and the attempt for its realization in doing classics, foreign or our own, is a self-defeating objective. It negates the very purpose of doing a classic, which by its nature lends [itself] to different kinds of interpretation and approaches in accordance with contemporary tastes and values of theatre practice.” ¹¹

Availability of dramatic opportunities for actors of all ages can be another motive for reviving Greek drama. According to another recent *New York Times* article (September 29, 1998), contemporary actresses and female playwrights favor Greek tragedy because of the extraordinary repertoire of powerful and subtle female roles. As playwright and translator Timberlake Wertenbaker remarked, the Greek poets “didn’t look down on women and didn’t give them small, stupid roles. The great flaw of modern plays is that they always try to make women nice. These women are terrible, and they have the courage of their horror.” Or as David Leveaux, director of the Sophocles *Electra* currently on Broadway, noted, “It’s hard to find a play that pits a number of ferociously powerful women against each other.”

Yet I would argue that a more fundamental reason, as either Aristotle or Freud would have been the first to point out, is plot. American TV, film, and theater are often based on the travails of dysfunctional families. Still, some stories, as Aristotle noted (*Poetics* 1453a.17-22), are more effective at moving a theater audience than others. Sophocles’ *Electra* is far more than “a timeless family tragedy and a lurid tabloid crime story”—to quote the recent *Times*’ review once more. Greek plots can, as Freud demonstrated, aim at uncovering deep psychological truths without degenerating into soap opera and, due in part to the presence of divine forces and a public, political setting in the remote past, provide a more complex notion of motivation than can be projected by reduced, modern characters in the present. Avant-garde productions that aim to retain a Brechtian sense of distance in relation to disturbing psychological and historical events have for comparable reasons also found Greek drama convenient.

In practice, a number of other performances and adaptations have expanded on the sexual and psychological dynamics of the original plots, especially in the case of the Oedipus story. Intelligent, sexually liberated Jocastas have been particularly popular of late. Both Rita Dove’s Jocasta-figure in *The Darker Face of the Earth* and Philip Freund’s heroine in his play *Jocasta* deliberately choose a black slave lover; he becomes the father of a mixed-race, rejected Oedipus. Here at last we find an environment where the failure to recognize the identity of the lost child is historically plausible. ¹² Steven Berkoff’s working-class “Eddy” (in his play *Greek*) goes so far as to greet the discovery that he has

married his now middle-class mother not with horror, but with a wish to return immediately to her bed. ¹³

The complex psychological resonance of Greek plots is only part of the story, however. Americans are getting over the need to write “original” dramas and are now on the lookout for plots with a known track record. Spareness, raw candor, and theatrical techniques that distinguish theater from film are becoming fashionable. Character in contemporary theater more often serves action. Moreover, although gods and the chorus can often be viewed as impediments to performing Greek drama on the modern stage, present-day playwrights often yearn for the sense of over-determination that shapes Greek tragedy. A student from my course on classical tragedy and performance asked the contemporary American playwright Charles Mee why he has turned so often to “remaking” these plays. “You must understand,” he replied, “that getting into a Greek plot is like stepping into a Rolls Royce.”

The dancer and choreographer Martha Graham explained her attraction to Greek myth along similar lines. Americans, Native Americans excepted, lack a rich mythical tradition of their own and must borrow from other traditions. In this respect we are like the Athenians of the archaic and classical periods, who had to appropriate Heracles’ labors to put their local hero Theseus on the cultural map. In Graham’s view, Greek myths constituted both her own and a more broadly shared “family history.” ¹⁴ Since classical myths are still taught in many American primary schools, these stories still have a certain, if perhaps dim, authority in our memories. At the same time, myths that rely on a pagan tradition are linked with no major organized religion and thus in a sense belong to the public domain, can be appropriated without offending anyone with clout, and even thrive on misreading (I think again of Disney’s *Hercules*). In adapting these myths, contemporary artists also follow classical tradition, where these traditional stories were not sacred scripture, but were constantly and competitively remade to please a changing, and, as time went on, ever more diverse audience.

Experimentation with Greek tragic plots has gone in a number of directions. Andrei Serban’s highly-praised *Fragments of a Greek Trilogy*, first performed at New York’s La Mama Etc. in 1972-74 and revived regularly since, distilled Euripides’ *Trojan Women* and *Medea* and Sophocles’ *Electra* into stunning plot sequences performed without comprehensible language. Drawing on a mixture of Greek, Latin, and African and Amerindian tribal languages, the actors capitalized on the phonetic force of ancient tongues to create a “ballet for the mouth.” ¹⁵ The actors aimed to “inhabit their bodies” with the sound of ancient texts, using every possible human body cavity as a resonator to discover what enabled Greek actors to project and produce intense communication with an audience and its gods in a huge open space. ¹⁶ Techniques of integrating voice, body, and movement borrowed from Noh, Kathakali, Kabuki, and Balinese theatre were used to tap what Serban called the “energy” that produced the ideas of the texts. The *agon* between Jason and Medea, both positioned on platforms at either end of a rectangular space, became an intense contest of sounds hurled and spit with a rage that could believably end in the killing of children. In *Trojan Women* the vengeful Trojan women hissed and clucked in a terrifying fashion as they smeared the body of the naked Helen with mud and

straw; Andromache's piercing vibrato plaint over Astyanax mingled rhythmically with the sounds of water used to wash the boy's body. (Excerpts of Serban's trilogy are currently available on video and can be purchased from Insight Media). Martha Graham's choreography, which stands behind many of these recent experiments, similarly represented Greek plots through the language of the body, what she called the "hidden language of the soul."¹⁷

Jean-Pierre Vernant has argued that Greek tragedy engages in a continuous dialogue with an imagined, heroic past.¹⁸ Contemporary playwrights also turn to Greek tragic plots to reflect on the relation between twentieth-century reality and an irrecoverable past, on a failed aspiration to civilization. Echoing much of the despair of the Euripidean original, Charles Mee's *Orestes* dwells on what he views as the ruined moral landscape of post-Vietnam America.¹⁹ He uses Euripides' plot as a scaffolding that hovers in the background as a reference point while it is simultaneously shattered, interrupted, and remade. Such fragmenting and reordering of tragic plots aims deliberately to eliminate dramatic irony, unity of action, and sharp reversals

of expectation. The chorus of Mee's *Orestes*, set in a hospital, is composed of crazed post-war vets and Fury-like nurses in black. The trial of Orestes, a well-meaning yuppie who gradually descends further and further into violence, occurs on stage, but is interrupted by the war victims and by the nurses' talk of aberrant sex in the foreground. The closing intervention of a heavily-miked Apollo (who is supposed to speak in the voice of the current United States President) has no effect. Instead, as one of the vets cries: "Every man must shout: there's great destructive work to be done. We're doing it!" (79). (I need not remark on the renewed relevance of this particular remaking of Euripides' text.)

The Japanese director Suzuki Tadashi has also fragmented and destroyed Greek tragic plots and their known values, then reconstructed them to make a new statement that involves a violent confrontation with the sensibility of the older plays. His *Clytemnestra*, for example, borrows scenes from all known versions of the Orestes myth and reorders the sequence of the traditional plot.²⁰ Reflecting the fluidity of time, identities, and realities in the plots of Noh drama,²¹ some scenes in *Clytemnestra* evolve in a chronological sequence, others apparently represent flashbacks or flashforwards that reflect internal conflict in Orestes and Electra. In the final scene a mutual suicide pact between Orestes and Electra concludes in an incestuous embrace; the ghost of Clytemnestra, dressed in a Noh costume, returns to kill her spiritually corrupt children. In Suzuki's version the siblings' betrayal of filial piety and the breakdown of the family become the ultimate crime. The play's debates neither acquit nor condemn Orestes, who sees no hope of exoneration. The gods are powerless and the play closes ironically, as the final, untraditional concluding scene opens to the tune of a 1980s Japanese pop song entitled "River of Fate."

Suzuki also deliberately brought Eastern and Western traditions into conflict in his performances. His multi-ethnic casts spoke in both English and Japanese; hence his plays were designed to communicate differently to and thus divide different members of its

equally multi-national audience. In *Clytemnestra*, Orestes alone spoke English.²² He wore a T-shirt and shorts and Electra a slip, whereas the other characters wore variations on traditional Japanese dress. In the final scene Orestes and Electra drew the suicidal knife from a wastebasket with a prominent Marlboro label before being killed by Clytemnestra's Noh ghost. The play links East and West through its exploration of the effects of a psychologically dominant maternal figure on her children,²³ but simultaneously sees the west as the origin of modern spiritual corruption, miscommunication, and isolation. Eastern familial piety ultimately makes the Western justice of the Greek originals impossible.

By contrast, Yukio Ninagawa in his 1978²⁴ *Medea* deliberately aimed both to escape from the contemporary Western domination of Japanese popular theater through a merging of Eastern and Western traditions and to create what he hoped would be a kind of "universal" theater. In an effective merging of traditions, for example, red ribbons symbolizing blood issued from the mouths of Medea and the sympathetic chorus as the heroine resolved on revenge following the exit of Creon; the accompanying music, however, was strictly Western. The use of an all-male cast and dramatic techniques borrowed from Kabuki enabled the lead actor, Tokusaburo Arashi, to exploit with particular effectiveness and self-consciousness the division in Medea between mother and vengeful hero. The actor, who was trained as a Kabuki *onnagata* (a male actor who plays female roles), began early in the performance to play off gestures, body movements, and intonations of voice traditionally linked with one sex against those linked with the other. After the Aegeus scene, he suddenly removed his elaborate female costume with its prominent breasts to reveal a masculine body beneath the heroine's blood-red robe, but retained his feminine face make-up. Medea's final debate over the killing of the children thus developed a powerful visual dimension.

Some classicists might respond to such experimental performances and adaptations of Greek tragedy along the lines of a minority of reviewers who have objected to their "cheap multiculturalism," lack of authenticity, and disrespect for the texts, above all for the words of the texts. Admittedly, modern theater, and especially avant-garde theater, rarely reaches a broad popular audience; nor are all these modern performances of Greek drama as compelling as one might wish.²⁵ Nevertheless, the confrontation between ancient text and modern performance can spark the imagination of modern students and theater-goers and invite them to make these texts their own in a fashion they might otherwise feel intimidated about doing. When I juxtapose ancient texts and modern versions in the classroom, I am often surprised at the loyalty to the originals that the process generates. Nowhere is this more surprisingly true than in the case of the feminist response. On first reading, the *Oresteia* can produce in the classroom a group of budding Kate Milletts. Yet when confronted with a deliberately feminist version of this and other Greek tragedies, the same students can find themselves resisting the domestication and disempowerment of frightening, articulate heroines like Clytemnestra and Medea. As Sallie Goetsch has argued in a review of Ariane Minouchkine's *Les Atrides*, Minouchkine's decision to stage Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* before the *Oresteia* created a more sympathetic Clytemnestra, but also reduced and feminized her in a fashion that unbalanced the play.²⁶ In *Agamemnon*, Minouchkine's tiny, plainly dressed

Clytemnestra was dwarfed by the gorgeously costumed chorus of old men and diminished by using feminine wiles to seduce Agamemnon into walking into the palace, rather than persuading him, as in Aeschylus, to tread on tapestries against his better judgment. The non-sexual and passive bag ladies and dogs that formed the chorus of *Eumenides* played no significant role in the action because they produced no genuine fear in any of the other characters. They chanted and danced their binding song on Orestes, for example, when the hero was off-stage.

What does the revival of Greek tragedy on the modern stage offer us as classicists, and how can we participate constructively in the process? In my undergraduate days at Swarthmore College, some classicists came to our student production of *Hippolytus* and sat through it following the Greek in their texts rather than observing the action on stage. No wonder the makers of theater sometimes perceive classical scholars as unreceptive to innovation. Yet other classicists have been actively involved in offering dramaturgical advice from the earliest phases of major productions. Scholarly studies on performance and translations amenable to performance accompanied by suitable introductions have begun to emerge in greater numbers. Indeed, given the growing interest in Greek drama in Asia, new translations with accompanying materials in a variety of non-Western languages might help to develop a broader global interest in our field. We can take advantage of current opportunities to spread broader interest in Greek tragedy by participating in or organizing presentations in a variety of local media, including workshops for theatre-goers of all ages. We can lobby for the modification of laws that prevent archival videotapes of these performances from being made available for study at colleges and universities. Indeed, this is probably the most important thing we can do, because, although these laws were meant to protect theater professionals, they in fact often do more harm than good by destroying any access to important productions and eliminating opportunities to mold new theater audiences.

At the same time, modern performances have much to teach us. Artists provide important critical responses to Greek drama from a variety of perspectives not always available in the academy. This is especially the case with non-Western performances, since there are few Asian or African classicists around to offer us their scholarly viewpoint. The commercially available audio tape of *The Gospel at Colonus* has sold remarkably well; no element of this tape was more popular than the gospel song made from Robert Fitzgerald's translation of part of the *polla ta deina* ode from Sophocles' *Antigone*.²⁷ In its changed setting, this excerpt, with its stress on the inability of otherwise ingenious humans to confront death, immensely facilitated the play's merging of Christian and pagan traditions. It made me understand that actors' interpolations may not always, as we sometimes seem to assume, have corrupted the originals; indeed, they may also have entirely transformed them for a later age.

Let me close with another example from personal experience. When Olympia Dukakis was rehearsing the role of the heroine in Euripides' *Hecuba* for a production directed by Carey Perloff at the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco, she could not motivate Hecuba's insistence on the play's bizarre closing trial scene.²⁸ In her conception of the part, the queen's revenge was enough, and the trial a dramatic letdown.

As I struggled to offer an explanation to her, the play suddenly took on a new strangeness to me; once again the performer's perspective posed questions about scenes that classicists have not explored. Overall, then, to the degree that we are self-conscious about what our texts offer to modern theater, we will be better equipped both to learn from and contribute to the process of staging or reimagining them. As scholars of Greek drama we are, as Charles Mee remarked, indeed riding in a Rolls-Royce. And I advise all of you to test this assertion by attending Peter Meineck's workshop on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* tonight. [29](#)

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¹ "The Mysteries of Eleusis," directed by Vasilios Calitsis, October 1998.

² As reported by Leonore Champagne.

³ Niansheng 1986: 79.

⁴ City Center, directed by Niketi Kontouri, September 1998.

⁵ Harrison 1985. McLaughlin's play was performed by the Classic Stage Company in New York City and directed by David Esjornson, January-March 1995.

⁶ Available on video from KYUK-TV Productions, Pouch 68, Bethel, Alaska, AK 99559. See also Hunsaker 1987.

⁷ See, e.g., Colakis 1993, Hartigan 1995, and McDonald 1992.

⁸ Burian 1997 and MacIntosh 1997.

⁹ See Steiner 1984, Roche 1988, and Fugard 1976.

¹⁰ Kediu 1985: 78.

¹¹ Awasthi 1987: 121.

¹² Dove 1996 and Freund 1973.

¹³ Berkoff 1994.

¹⁴ *New York Times* (March 11, 1987): 28.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Swados, quoted in a WNYC-TV documentary on Ellen Stewart, September 21, 1990 (Green 1994: 48 n. 21).

¹⁶ Bartow 1988: 294 and Menta 1995: 16.

¹⁷ *New York Times* (March 11, 1987): 28.

¹⁸ Vernant 1981.

¹⁹ Mee 1998.

²⁰ Suzuki 1986: 121-58.

²¹ Goto 1989.

²² This discussion is based on a rehearsal taped for Japanese television production in 1985.

²³ McDonald 1992.

²⁴ After its 1978 premiere in Japan the play toured worldwide and was staged in the United States in 1986.

²⁵ See Golder 1996 for a negative view.

²⁶ Goetsch 1994.

²⁷ Elektra/Asylum/Nonesuch Records 1988.

²⁸ ACT produced the play in both 1995 and 1998. The conversation occurred during rehearsals for the 1995 production.

²⁹ “Staging *The Oresteia*: Mask and Modern Performance. A Practical Workshop,” with P. Meineck, R. Richmond, and members of the USC/Aquila MFA Acting Internship Program. Sponsored by the APA Three-Year Colloquium on Varieties of Performance in the Mediterranean, the workshop was presented from 8:30-11:30 p.m. on December 28, 1998, at the Marriott Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, D.C.