



MANUELA GIORDANO – *Athenian Power: Seven Against Thebes and the Democracy-in-Arms*

VASILIKI KOUSOULINI – *Restraining the Song of her Mistress¹ and Saving the Oikos? Nurses in Euripides' Medea, Hippolytus and Andromache*

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Special Section

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Athenian Power: *Seven Against Thebes* and the Democracy-in-Arms

Abstract

The paper highlights the martial dimension of power in democratic Athens, and Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* is interpreted as a significant case of this. The drama, a 'civic tragedy' in all respects, can be fully understood, it is argued, when set in the historical context of 467 BCE. Building on previous analyses, the paper deals with Aeschylean double construction of a masculine identity, represented in Eteocles and opposed to the chorus, on the one hand, and a warlike hoplitic warrior embodied in the Cadmean defenders and opposed to the Argive enemies on the other. It is also suggested that tragedy, an 'invention d'Athènes' nonetheless, plays a pivotal role in the construction of Athenian ideology.

KEYWORDS: Aeschylus; tragedy; *Seven against Thebes*; democratic ideology; Aristophanes; *Frogs*; hoplitic warfare

In assessing, in 1997, the main critical approaches to Greek tragedy, Simon Goldhill affirmed: "There is no natural, self-evident or obvious way of reading – but always only approaches, each with its history, its set of presuppositions and its own ideological commitments. . . . The question is how explicit, how sophisticated and how self-aware the discussion of that position is to be" (Goldhill 1997: 331). More than twenty years later, I still think it very important for us as scholars of tragedy to be both clear and aware about where we start from in approaching Greek tragedy in general, and/or one play in particular.¹

My approach to tragedy builds upon a number of studies that have helped to understand 'tragedy-in-context', that is, tragedy in its historical embeddedness. Fifth-century Athens was an interconnected society, where political, religious, martial, artistic and literary phenomena did not work

¹ See on this point Giordano 2005. See also the contributions published in Nicholson (2018).

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as separate provinces, as an etic perspective would assume, but instead formed a closely knit framework in which tragedy was considered not only an artistic textual product, but also a socio-political institution – part of a civic religious discourse – and a ritual performance.² This approach to tragedy is historical and anthropological at the same time: on the one hand it locates a tragic text in the specific time of its production, the fifth century BCE, and predicates that the meanings conveyed by the text can be best understood when related to the networks of meanings of its original context, and on the other it is anthropological because it involves reconstructing a perspective as close as possible to that of the ancient Athenians, something that anthropologists would call an ‘emic’ perspective.³

I have proposed a ‘simultaneous’ model made up of a hierarchy of contexts, which may enable us to take into account as many of the above-mentioned phenomena as possible. We may think of the public space, at once concrete and symbolic, acting as the higher context; the larger unit in which religious, political, and artistic elements were likewise embedded, and in relation to which their different contexts took on their meaning. As such, the public space enables us to think of these diverse contexts in their dynamic and meaningful interplay, rather than as discrete provinces (Giordano 2014: 151–5). By reasoning in terms of hierarchies of contexts we may therefore appreciate that tragedy in itself is a context placed within larger contexts, the festival of the Great Dionysia in the first place, as occasion for a performance integral to democracy in action (Goldhill 1987; Goldhill 2000) – a context within which ‘warfare’, ‘religion’ and ‘politics’ are equally relevant insofar as they informed the civic debate, that is the discourse(s) of the *polis*. As a shorthand term for what I have expressed so far, I will speak of ‘civic tragedy’, and in the present essay, building upon some former contributions (Giordano 2006a; Giordano 2006b; Giordano 2008), I propose a reading of the *Seven against Thebes* as an important example of this.⁴ We may be assured that a civic interpretation of our play does not rest on a solely etic perspective, since this is the role that a fifth-century witness bestows on the *Seven*. In a difficult wartime moment, as 405

² It goes without saying that in several contributions the social and political context of tragedy is hinted at, but for an approach consistently informed by the historical and socio-political dimensions of tragedy, Vernant and Vidal Naquet 1981, and most essays in Easterling 1997 are as yet the standard references. For a recent assessment, see Giordano 2014.

³ Ugolini 2000 is a particular noteworthy attempt at reading Sophoclean tragedy within the historical context of its time. For the relationship between history and tragedy see Meier 1993; Goff 1995; Beltrametti 2011; Carter 2011.

⁴ Saïd (2005: 222) notes, cursorily, that *Seven* is a “political play” and Eteocles is a leader “defined only by relationship to the *polis*”.

BCE was for Athens, Aristophanes' comedy *Frogs* asserts that salvation may only come to Athens from a tragic poet; the god Dionysus in person goes down to the Underworld to pick the poet most fit for the task, having to choose between Aeschylus and Euripides. While the comedy is in itself a clear indication of the connection of tragedy with political and civic discourse, it provides us with specific indications of the way a tragic poet helps to boost civic morale. At 1019-27, the two tragic poets confront each other to prove themselves to be the most apt for the task at hand, and Aeschylus is encouraged to demonstrate the superiority of his tragedies over those of Euripides:

- EY. καὶ τί σὺ δράσας οὕτως αὐτοὺς γενναίους ἐξεδίδαξας;
 ΔΙ. Αἰσχύλε, λέξον, μὴδ' αὐθάδως σεμνυνόμενος χαλέπαινε. 1020
 ΑΙ. δρᾶμα ποιήσας Ἄρεως μεστόν.
 ΔΙ. ποῖον;
 ΑΙ. τοὺς ἑπτ' ἐπὶ Θήβας.
 ὃ θεασάμενος πᾶς ἄν τις ἀνὴρ ἠράσθη δάιος εἶναι.
 ΔΙ. τουτὶ μὲν σοι κακὸν εἴργασται· Θηβαίους γὰρ πεπόηκας
 ἀνδρειότερους ἐς τὸν πόλεμον, καὶ τούτου γ' οὐνεκα τύπτου.
 ΑΙ. ἀλλ' ὑμῖν αὐτ' ἐξῆν ἄσκεῖν, ἀλλ' οὐκ ἐπὶ τοῦτ' ἐτράπεσθε. 1025
 εἶτα διδάξας Πέρσας μετὰ τοῦτ' ἐπιθυμεῖν ἐξεδίδαξα
 νικᾶν ἀεὶ τοὺς ἀντιπάλους, κοσμήσας ἔργον ἄριστον.

[EURIPIDES And just how did you train them to be so noble? / DIONYSUS Speak up, Aeschylus and don't be a willfully prideful and difficult. / AESCHYLUS By composing a play chock-full of Ares. / DIONYSUS Name-ly? / AESCHYLUS My *Seven against Thebes* / every single man who watched it was hot to be warlike. / DIONYSUS Well, that was an evil accomplishment, because you've made the Thebans / more valiant in battle, and you deserve a beating for it. / AESCHYLUS No, you could all have had the same training, but you didn't go in that direction. / Thereafter I produced my *Persians*, which taught them to yearn always / to defeat the enemy, and thus I adorned an excellent achievement. (Trans. Henderson 2002)]

Aeschylus picks two tragedies, *Seven* and *Persians*, to show how he did his best to teach the Athenians. If line 1021 is, as is most likely, a quote from Gorgias – which attests to the tragedy's long-lasting reputation throughout the fifth century⁵ – the reference to the *Seven* must have been immediately understood by the audience, who would have had numerous occasions to become familiar with the tragedy, wholly or in part, including the repeat

⁵ 82 B 24 D.-K. Donadi (1977-1978) sheds doubt on whether verse 1021 is a quote of Gorgias. For our purpose, the essential point is that the public was fully able to understand Aristophanes' allusion to the martial content of the tragedy, even if the verse was not taken from Gorgias.

performances after the year 467 that made it well-known to public opinion as an inspiring model of martial *ethos*.⁶

Two facts stand out: of all his tragedies, Aristophanes' Aeschylus chooses *Seven* and *Persians* to represent the best and most significant of his productions; what makes these plays particularly relevant in terms of civic concern is that both taught martial virtues to the Athenians: they learned courage from the former, and desire to win in battle from the latter. In other words, *Seven* played its role as civic tragedy in providing martial paradigms, and it is in this respect that it proved to Aristophanes' audience that Athens needed Aeschylus again to save the city in a time of war.

While it may come to us as a surprise that in the Athenian reception, the martial aspect of the play was placed at centre stage, this is much in keeping with fifth-century public ethos. As has been recently pointed out, the first, constant, and vital concern of the young democracy of Athens was war; warfare and martial identity were the very foundation of the discourse on power of Athenian democracy (see for example Pritchard 2010). If in Greece in general "... war shaped Greek identities no less than Greek political, social, and economic life" (van Wees 2000: 81), this was even more true for a fifth-century Athenian citizen. We would do well to note that modern historical studies have elaborated an image of Athens as a model of democracy in political-institutional terms, with an emphasis on its structure of government. For fifth-century Athenians, however, their city was first and foremost a military power, an ἀρχή, a 'democracy in arms', and only secondly a 'democracy of institutions'. As Mossé notes (Mossé 1968: 221) the combined individual identity as both citizen and soldier mirrors the collective identification of military supremacy with political supremacy. Furthermore, at the time *Seven* was performed, Athenian military exploits, visual and tragic narratives formed the discrete parts of a single process of identity construction (Giordano, forthcoming).

While the testimony of Aristophanes shows the *Seven* to be an eminently civic tragedy as it deals with war as the most important issue of democratic agenda, the martial aspect of the *Seven* has received little attention, probably because, unlike *Persians*, the tragedy does not describe battles or military actions – with the exception of the messenger's laconic announcement of the mutual killing of the brothers (l. 805). In what follows, therefore, I will provide an overview of *Seven*, pointing out some civic themes

⁶ On repeat performances see Giordano 2014: 170-1; Lamari 2015. Note that the verb διδάσκω and its composites are repeated from verse 1019 to 1035 five times, each of which in relation to the function of the poet. On the interpretation of ll. 1019-1025 see Sonnino 1999: 69-72, who interprets the reference to *Seven* as a criticism of Pericles' military strategy, with good use of the historical context.

crucial for a *polis* in a time of war, from leadership to cult.⁷

Prologue (1-39): Eteocles' Speech

In the prologue, Eteocles acts as a figure wholly engrossed in civic concerns, the leader who feels his responsibility for the destiny of the community;⁸ at ll. 1-20, he enumerates the priorities for an army made of citizen-soldiers:

Κάδμου πολῖται, χρηὶ λέγειν τὰ καίρια
 ὅστις φυλάσσει πρᾶγος ἐν πρύμνῃ πόλεως
 οἶακα νωμῶν, βλέφαρα μὴ κοιμῶν ὕπνῳ.
 . . .
 ὑμᾶς δὲ χρηὶ νῦν, καὶ τὸν ἐλλείποντ' ἔτι 10
 ἥβης ἀκμαίας καὶ τὸν ἔξηβον χρόνῳ,
 βλαστημὸν ἀλδαίνοντα σώματος πολύν,
 ὦραν τ' ἔχονθ' ἕκαστον ὥστε συμπρεπές,
 πόλει τ' ἀρήγειν καὶ θεῶν ἐγχωρίων
 βωμοῖσι, τιμὰς μὴ ἔαλειφθῆναί ποτε· 15
 τέκνοις τε, Γῇ τε μητρὶ, φιλτάτῃ τροφῷ·
 ἢ γὰρ νέους ἔρποντας εὐμενεῖ πέδῳ,
 ἅπαντα πανδοκοῦσα παιδείας ὄτλον,
 ἐθρέψατ' οἰκητῆρας ἀσπιδηφόρους
 πιστοὺς ὅπως γένοισθε πρὸς χρέος τόδε. 20

[Men of Cadmus's city, he who guards from the stern the concerns of the State / and guides its helm with eyes untouched by sleep / must speak to the point. / But now you – both he who is still short of/ his youthful prime, and he who, though past his prime, / still strengthens the abundant growth of his body, / and every man still in his prime, as is fitting / – you must aid the State and the altars of your homeland's gods/ so that their honors may never be obliterated. / You must aid, too, your children, and Mother Earth, your beloved nurse. / For welcoming all the distress of your childhood, when you were young and crept upon her kind soil, / she raised you to inhabit her and bear the shield, / and to prove yourselves faithful in this time of need. (Aeschylus 1938)]

⁷ See Giordano 2006a and Giordano 2006b; on *Seven* and war see also Lamari 2007: 6-9; Torrance 2017. Torrance 2017a sees in the atmosphere of the play an implicit reference to the Persian sack of Athens. See on this issue already Saïd 2005: 217, who remarked “the chorus envisages the destruction of the city in vivid details that owe much to the sack and burning of the Acropolis by Xerxes' troops”. For martial and civic aspects, Echeverria 2017 and Edmunds 2017. I follow the edition of Sommerstein, Aeschylus 2009, with minor changes.

⁸ On Eteocles see now Edmunds 2017.

In this first speech we should note three elements pointing to civic concerns: 1) Eteocles' identification with the *polis*' interests, introducing the traditional imagery of the ship as symbol of the state, of which he proclaims himself steersman and leader; 2) the centrality of appropriate utterances for the destiny of the city (Thalman 1978; Giordano 2006b: 57); 3) the mention of Γῆ μήτηρ, 'Mother Earth', at 16.

If the passage could be adapted to diverse war contexts, in Athens the reference to the native soil is most particular: Γῆ, the 'Earth', is every Athenian's true mother, who generated, nurtured, raised and supported the city's inhabitants until, like adult plants, they reached their maturity as the οἰκητῆρας ἀσπιδηφόρους, "shield-bearing dwellers" of 19, and to whom, after death, they will return.⁹ This is not the place to address the larger significance of the theme of autochthony in Athens, but it is interesting to note that roughly in the same period of our tragedy, the celebration of the earth as the mother of the Athenians might have been elaborated in the epitaphios logos, the funeral oration with which the Athenians celebrated their dead and glorified Athens, the Mother-city. Here too Aeschylus makes Eteocles the spokesman of a two-fold Athenian point of view, that of autochthony on one hand, and on the other, that of the Athenian ideology, as Loraux points out in relation to funeral orations, in which the individual fights primarily for the sake of the city.¹⁰

***Parodos* (78-180): Presentation of Women's Perspective: Fear and λιταί**

The *parodos* shows the women intervening in the public space with supplications, and imploring the gods to save the city. Here, as well as in the first *stasimon*, the chorus describes the lot of a besieged and conquered city, particularly referring to the fate of women as expressed in ll. 87-95 – the collateral damage, in Meineck's terms¹¹ – where the issue of supplication comes to the fore most vehemently:

ἰὼ θεοὶ θεαὶ τ' ὀρόμενον κακὸν
 βοᾷ τειχέων ὕπερ ἀλεύσατε.
 ὁ λεύκασπις ὀρνυται λαὸς εὐ-
 τρεπῆς ἐπὶ πόλιν διώκων πόδα.
 τίς ἄρα ῥύσεται, τίς ἄρ' ἐπαρκέσει

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⁹ For Γῆ as *kourotrophos* in Athens see Pirenne-Delforge 2004, Parker 2005, 426-36.

¹⁰ On funeral oration see Pritchett 1971: 106-204, 249-51; Clairmont 1983; Loraux 1993. On autochthony see, among others, Calame 2011. On autochthony and motherhood see Loraux 1990; Leduc 2015.

¹¹ Meineck 2017.

θεῶν ἢ θεᾶν;
 πότερα δῆτ' ἐγὼ πάτρια ποτιπέσω
 βρέτη δαυμόνων;

95

[Ah, ah, you gods and goddesses, raise your war cry over our walls to drive away the onrushing evil! / The army of the white shield, ready for battle, rushes / at full speed against the city. / Who then will rescue us, which of the gods or goddesses will help? / Or shall I fall in supplication at the feet of / our ancestral gods' statues?]

That the behaviour of the chorus, however, would have triggered a reaction of empathy in the audience, as Meineck suggests, may be the projection of a modern appraisal: the confrontation of the chorus with Eteocles may reveal a different perspective (2017: 66-8).

First Episode: a Confrontation of Religious Attitudes

In this first episode, Eteocles contests the chorus of women, and the resulting opposition between the two points of view serves not only to construct two gender-related polarized views, but also as a way of propounding a model of civic behaviour in religious terms.¹² The scene hinges primarily on a cultic question, i.e. the best way to address the gods in a moment of danger; the women display an attitude which contrasts with Eteocles' priority of strengthening morale, as the exchange at ll. 211-18, 230-3 shows most pointedly:

- XO. ἀλλ' ἐπὶ δαυμόνων πρόδρομος ἦλθον ἀρ-
 χαῖα βρέτη, θεοῖσι πίσυνος, νιφάδος
 ὅτ' ὀλοᾶς νειφομένας βρόμος ἐν πύλαις:
 δὴ τότ' ἦρθην φόβῳ πρὸς μακάρων λιτάς, πόλεως
 ἵν' ὑπερέχοιεν ἀλκάν. 215
- ET. πύργον στέγειν εὐχεσθε πολέμιον δόρυ.
 οὐκοῦν τάδ' ἔσται πρὸς θεῶν: ἀλλ' οὖν θεοὺς
 τοὺς τῆς ἀλούσης πόλεος ἐκλείπειν λόγος.
-
- ET. ἀνδρῶν τάδ' ἐστί, σφάγια καὶ χρηστήρια 230
 θεοῖσιν ἔρδειν πολέμιων πειρωμένους:
 σὸν δ' αὖ τὸ σιγᾶν καὶ μένειν εἴσω δόμων.

[CHORUS But trusting in the gods I came / in haste to their ancient statues, when the deadly blizzard / of falling stones thundered against the gates. / Just then I set out in fear to pray to the Blessed Ones /that they spread their protection over the city. / ETEOCLES Pray that the rampart withstand the en-

¹² See Giordano 2006a for further details.

emy spear. / Yes, the outcome is in the gods' hands – but then, / it is said that the gods of a captured city abandon it. . . . / It is the man's duty to offer victims and sacrifices/ to the gods when they test their enemy; / your duty is to be silent and to remain inside the house.]

The question of λέγειν τὰ καίρια of line 1 takes on a precise meaning. Aeschylus presents a dialectic confrontation between two opposing approaches:

1) Hoplitic civic religiosity embodied in Eteocles and manifested in ritual acts of sacrifice and prayer, described in terms of reciprocity.

2) The religiosity of the Chorus, based upon a supplicatory attitude, is tendentially described by Eteocles as negative and socially disruptive. The women's position is represented in acts of supplication and supplicatory prayers (λιταί).¹³

The chorus addresses the gods with gestures of supplication and λιταί, and shouts liturgical implorations and laments, in a destabilizing reaction of terror in response to the sight and sound of the enemy army. Eteocles scolds the women violently for such behaviour, demoralizing for the city and the army, and in contrast offers a decalogue of ritual gestures and words that aim to strengthen morale and instill courage when the *polis* is at war: prayer (εὐχή), sacrifice and divination (Giordano 2006a). On the trail of this reading, Lamari (2007) has drawn a parallel between the “male-oriented viewpoint” of Aeschylus with the female-oriented perspective of Euripides' *Phoenissae*.¹⁴

First *Stasimon*: a Re-Modulation of Feminine Attitude

At 262-4, the women of the chorus explicitly announce their change of attitude and speak according to the instructions they have received from Eteocles:

ET. σίγησον, ὦ τάλαινα, μὴ φίλους φόβει.

XO. σιγῶ: σὺν ἄλλοις πείσομαι τὸ μῶρσιμον.

ET. τοῦτ' ἀντ' ἐκείνων τοῦπος αἰροῦμαι σέθεν.

¹³ As Zeitlin 1990: 104 has argued, in Aeschylean drama, the playwright uses the opposition between male and female to encompass *polis*-related issues larger than politics of gender, and to present “the differing patterns of power relations between the sexes and invoke the qualities symbolically associated with each”. On women and tragedy see also Foley 2001.

¹⁴ In this opposition, the scholar has seen an implicit reference to Solon's political measures on women's lamentation in Aeschylean drama (Lamari 2007: 17); on this issue, see now Palmisciano 2017: 105-11 and *passim*.

[ETEOCLES / Be silent, wretched woman; do not terrify your own men. /
 CHORUS I am silent. I will suffer what is destined together with the others. /
 ETEOCLES I welcome this sentiment of yours over what you said before.]

Eteocles has thus succeeded, at least for the moment, in reducing the chorus to silence, a passage which aptly represents the marginalization of women's voices in fifth-century Athens, and the effort of the male citizen, imbued with militaristic ideology, to control their emotional expression.

Second Episode: The Scene of the Shields

I take this part of the tragedy, the scene of the shields, to be its core, where the tragedy's martial character is to be seen in providing paradigms for the new Athenian agenda. In this scene, in fact, Aeschylus describes the appearance and behaviour of the warriors in antithetical terms on two fronts: in the progressive opposition between the Argive warrior (the messenger) and his Theban adversary (Eteocles), the poet contrasts two models of warfare, one negative and one positive. While the Argive attackers represent the anti-hoplite characterized as barbaric, wild and out of proportion, the Cadmean warriors represent a model for the hoplite-citizen.¹⁵ So for example Capaneus is described as a savage warrior, spurning men and gods alike in 423-9:

ΑΙΤ. Καπανεύς δ' ἐπ' Ἠλέκτραισιν εἴληχεν πύλαις,
 γίγας ὃδ' ἄλλος τοῦ πάρος λελεγμένου
 μείζων, ὁ κόμπος δ' οὐ κατ' ἄνθρωπον φρονεῖ, 425
 πύργοις δ' ἀπειλεῖ δειν', ἃ μὴ κραίνοι τύχη·
 θεοῦ τε γὰρ θέλοντος ἐκπέρσειν πόλιν
 καὶ μὴ θέλοντός φησιν, οὐδὲ τὴν Διὸς
 ἔριν πέδοι σκήψασαν ἐμποδῶν σχεθεῖν.

[SCOUT Capaneus is stationed at the Electran gates, / another giant of a man, greater than the one described before. / But his boast is too proud for a mere human, / and he makes terrifying threats against our battlements – which, I hope, chance will not fulfil! / For he says he will utterly destroy the city with god's will or without it, / and that not even conflict with Zeus, / though it should fall before him in the plain, will stand in his way.]

¹⁵ Detienne (1968: 126) highlighted the *hybris* of the Argive side and the *sophrosyne* of the Theban side: “rejétant l'insolence, les paroles de défi, maîtrisant son ardeur, le défenseur de Thèbes met sa force au service de la cité, de son chef, de ses dieux. Si, dans les *Sept contre Thèbes*, Eschyle rejette toute une série de conduites guerrières . . . , c'est que, dans la cité classique, le guerrier comme type d'homme a disparu: il a cédé la place au citoyen-soldat”.

In sharp opposition to this type of warrior stand Cadmean defenders, exemplified, among the others, by the figure of Actor, whom Eteocles describes in 554-7:

ἀνὴρ ἄκομπος, χεῖρ δ' ὄρᾳ τὸ δράσιμον,
 Ἄκτωρ ἀδελφὸς τοῦ πάρος λελεγμένου·
 ὃς οὐκ ἐάσει γλῶσσαν ἐργμάτων ἄτερ
 ἔσω πυλῶν ῥέουσιν ἀλδαίνειν κακά.
 555

[A man who does not boast, but who knows the thing to do / Actor, brother of him I named before. / He will not allow words that lack deeds / to overrun his gate and increase fear.]

The scene of the shields thus continues the construction of the civic discourse begun in the first part of the drama, relating to the religion of the *polis* at war, and extends it to the ideal hoplite warrior by use of another polarization.

The hoplite vs. anti-hoplite opposition in fact forms the first level of Aeschylus' manoeuvre, the most evident and most direct. The second level has a wider scope and meaning, to which I can only briefly refer, and consists in reinterpreting the Homeric model of the warrior. I have already attempted to demonstrate that Aeschylus not only represents the Argive heroes as an example of barbarism, but that he does so by merging this with elements of the Homeric warrior, contrasting it with the new model of Athenian hoplitism (Giordano 2006a). In this sense the Homeric reading Aeschylus offers in *Seven* is fundamental for understanding not only this tragedy but also the function of tragedy as a genre in relation to the epic in fifth-century Athenian discourse, whereby civic tragedy becomes a form of social critique of the epic model. Central to this process of reuse is the iteration of the term κόμπος and its cognates, which appear nine times in the scene of the shields. Κόμπος means both noise and boasting, and therefore plays a primary role in transforming the acoustic display of the Argive heroes into useless and ineffective boasting.¹⁶ Whereas the Argive warriors are marked by acoustic and visual ostentation, the Cadmean champions emit neither sounds nor noise. Rather, they are characterized by their silence and restraint. In describing these warriors, the exalted 'virtues of display' of the individual are transformed into internal virtues such as steadfastness, moderation, and courage, for the sake of cohesion and exaltation of the group.

If in Athens the hoplite represented territorial community and, as Herman recently observed, "the hoplites were described as prototypes of the

¹⁶ Cf. 404, 425, 436, 464, 473, 480, 500, 538, 554 and 794 where the vanity of κόμπος is emphasized.

exemplary type of Athenian manhood, fit in body and disciplined in spirit” (Herman 2006: 250),¹⁷ in *Seven*, the Cadmean warriors bring out the identity and the interest of the entire *polis*, in contrast to the Homeric Argives, as shown in the examples quoted above.

This new image of the warrior is eminently Athenian: in Athens, citizens and soldiers are one and the same, and Athenian discourse makes a point of joining autochthony and warfare, where mother earth nurtures her children as “shield-bearing inhabitants”, οἰκητῆρας ἀσπιδηφόρους of 19. It is in this context that the tragedy brings to the fore the exemplary image of the hoplite warrior, personified by the Theban defenders, set against a “Homeric-aristocratic” warrior identified in the Argive attackers. The ethic of the hoplite phalanx requires self-control in battle, as hoplite strategy works in so far as the entire phalanx moves together in tight ranks, and every soldier respects the position (τάξις) where he is stationed and moves together with the rest; consequently, hoplitic warfare rejects those behaviours that imply loss of control, which, on the contrary, characterizes Homeric martial behaviour. The *Seven* provides a beautiful example of hoplitic behaviour in the portrait of Megareus, at 473-80:

ET. Καὶ δὴ πέπεμπται κόμπον ἐν χεροῖν ἔχων
 Μεγαρεύς, Κρέοντος σπέρμα τοῦ σπαρτῶν γένους,
 ὃς οὔτι μάργων ἵππικῶν φρυαγμάτων 475
 βρόμον φοβηθεὶς ἐκ πυλῶν χωρήσεται,
 ἀλλ’ ἢ θανὼν τροφεῖα πληρώσει χθονί,
 ἢ καὶ δὺ’ ἄνδρε καὶ πόλισμ’ ἐπ’ ἀσπίδος
 ἐλὼν λαφύροις δῶμα κοσμήσει πατρός.
 κόμπαζ’ ἐπ’ ἄλλω, μηδὲ μοι φθόνει λέγων. 480

[ETEOCLES Indeed, he has already been sent, his only boast in his hands, / Megareus, Creon’s seed, of the race of the sown- men. / He will not withdraw from the gate in fear of the thunder of the horses’ furious snorting;/ but either he will die and pay the earth the full price of his nurture, / or will capture two men and the city on the shield, / and then adorn his father’s house with the spoils].

In conclusion, while the new military engagement following the foundation of the Delian League (477 BCE) was the primary concern of the Athenian *polis*, *Seven against Thebes* portrays a *polis* at war, and delineates inspiring models of behaviour in the spheres of both warfare and religion. Such delineation could be seen to sustain and foster the communal effort

¹⁷ See also Herman 2006: 246-57, where the scholar highlights, among other things, the identification of Athens’ collective interests with those of the individual hoplites, and how Athenian politics tended to promote the entrance of the largest possible number of citizens.

to raise Athenian military power, which will soon lead Athens to the construction of her empire. It is thanks to this play that Aeschylus will be remembered in the fifth century – as Aristophanes' *Frogs* attests – for having significantly contributed to the new discourse of power in the civic Athenian arena.

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Restraining the Song of her Mistress and Saving the *Oikos*? Nurses in Euripides' *Medea*, *Hippolytus* and *Andromache*¹

Abstract

Contemporary scholars usually associate actors' song with extremely heightened emotion. Solo songs in tragedy, and especially in Euripides, are frequently attributed to female characters. In this article I examine three instances where a female character (*Medea*, *Phaedra* and *Hermione*) who sings is juxtaposed with another female character, a Nurse, who speaks or chants. Nurses attempt to restrain the songs of their mistresses and, usually, encourage them to articulate their thoughts in a more rational way. The excessive emotions, unrealistic fears and uncontrolled desires expressed by song are perceived by the Nurses as a threat to the lives of their mistresses. These emotions also pose a serious threat to the survival of the *oikos*. Nurses encourage these singing females to be more rational and attempt to save their lives, that is, they serve a consolatory function within the play; nevertheless, in this tragic environment both self-absorbed singing and dialogue lead to disaster.

KEYWORDS: Euripides; song; *oikos*; nurses

Introduction

Greek tragedy did not develop in a cultural and literary vacuum. On the contrary, Greek tragedy developed within a 'song culture' (see Herington 1985: 3-10). This has as an implication that the audience of fifth-century Attic drama was, to some extent, an integral part of this 'song culture'.² Not only was the audience of Greek tragedy acquainted with many different lyric genres, but the tragedians had to respect certain generic conventions in order to allude to them. Tragedians did not only recall the most

¹ This research was funded by the State Scholarships Foundation (IKY) through the operational programme: Human Resources Development, Education and Life-long Learning 2014-2020.

² See Kurke 2000: 60; Hall 2002: 5-6; Ford 2003; Swift 2010: 31; Bierl 2016: 3n4.

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eminent characteristics of various lyric genres, but they also used lyric metres to appropriate them.³ Singing in tragedy seems to have been considered a gendered activity. Especially in Euripides, most of the choruses are female and singing female characters outnumber the singing male characters.⁴ As Hall suggests, tragedy's innovation was to integrate genres into a complicated artistic pattern: spoken verse alternated with various types of sung poetry (see Hall 2002: 6). The tragic song has traditionally been considered as emotional, solo arias often replete with pathetic expressions and seen as moments of gushing, venting and even uncontrollable frenzy.⁵ The very switch between recitative and lyrics was considered as particularly emotive.⁶ Contemporary scholars consider that in Euripides the antithesis between the lyric and the spoken or chanted metres reflects the emotional state of each interlocutor. The emotionally unsettled female character sings a metrically complex song, which is in turn commented upon by a more rational speaker in iambic trimetres.⁷ Medea in the eponymous tragedy, Phaedra in *Hippolytus* and Hermione in *Andromache* appear to sing and to engage in a lyrical exchange with their Nurses who speak or chant. Furthermore, their Nurses seem to try to restrain their songs and to convince them to behave properly.⁸ Nonetheless, they seem to be greatly involved in the sufferings of the singing heroines. In these scenes, there seems to be a struggle between emotion and logic, sometimes expressed by the alternation of lyric and iambic metres. I suggest that in these domestic plays, the

³ On this issue see Rodighiero 2012; Bagordo 2015: 37-8.

⁴ See Cyrino 1998: 81-2; McClure 1995: 40; Hall 1999: 112-13, 116; Csapo 2000; Hall 2002: 5-8; Chong-Gossard 2003: 210; Chong-Gossard 2008: 26-8.

⁵ See Chong-Gossard 2008: 26. Cyrino has even suggested that in the *epirrhematica amoibaia* encountered in the extant plays of Euripides there is a type of 'lyric space' in which the singing character is represented as being in a position of greater vulnerability than that of the responding speaker, and whose status is thereby emphasized as being subordinate. See Cyrino 1998: 82. It is not surprising that in Greek tragedy females were connected with an activity that was considered almost irrational. Madness, the irrational, and the emotional aspects of life were associated in Greek culture more with women than with men. See on this e.g. Zeitlin 1985: 65.

⁶ See Dale 1984: 50-1; Hall 2002: 7.

⁷ See Cerbo 1989: 40; Cyrino 1998: 88; Hall 2002: 9; Chong-Gossard 2008: 34-6. Hall argues that this is not only evident in Euripides' work, but also in Aeschylus' and Sophocles' plays (1999: 108, see also 117-20). Damen calls Euripides' singers "notoriously self-absorbed" (1990: 134) in the sense that in their songs they mention themselves and their direful situations repeatedly. For the self-absorption of Euripides' female singers see also Hall 2002: 9.

⁸ Hall has noticed that in Greek tragedy the lyrics uttered by a character never become continuous but are restrained by the repeated insertion of iambic (and, that is, probably spoken) language: See Hall 1999: 117-20.

speaking actors in these scenes, the Nurses,⁹ try to save the lives of their mistresses. Nurses in these plays share the sufferings of the singing heroines and try to prevent them from performing acts of violence. These acts of violence have the potential to lead the *oikos*, to which the heroines and the Nurses belong, to destruction.¹⁰ These *oikoi* are threatened by the acts of violence that the singing heroines want to commit. These singers express in song their excessive emotions, unrealistic fears and uncontrolled desires that threaten the existence of the *oikoi* created by their union with a man. Nurses encourage these singing females to be more rational and this leads the heroines to articulate their thoughts in speech. Nevertheless, in this tragic environment, both self-absorbed singing and dialogue lead to disaster.

Family-Destroying Singers

Medea, Phaedra and Hermione use singing in order to express their excessive distress. All three do not sing a specific type of song. Instead, they engage in many different lyric modes. Their songs have affinities with the more private expressions of ritual lament.¹¹ Ritual lament was a traditional form of expression of grief that was considered challenging to the cohesion of the democratic *polis*;¹² nevertheless, lament, a typical form of expression

⁹ It should be noted that the Nurse in the *Medea* also uses anapaests, that is, she does not only speak, but also chants.

¹⁰ All three Nurses have faithfully followed their respective mistress, that is Medea, Phaedra and Hermione, from their native home. Medea, Phaedra and Hermione, as well as their Nurses, are integrated into their new *oikoi*.

¹¹ There were different types of ritual lament, such as *thrênos* and *góos*. The term *thrênos* is used for the set dirge composed and performed by the professional mourners, and the term *góos* for the spontaneous weeping of the kinswomen (see Alexiou 1974: 102-4). The songs of Medea, Phaedra and Hermione employ elements of the less public form of ritual lament. The heroines sing their songs in private (Medea inside the house, Phaedra and Hermione in front of their Nurse and a female chorus), they express very strong feelings and perform gestures associated with the more private forms of mourning, such as female ritual lament displayed at the *prothesis* (e.g., tearing off clothes, self-laceration). The term *góos* appears in *Medea* (59, οὐπω γὰρ ἡ τάλαινα παύεται γόων: "What? Does the poor woman not yet cease from moaning?") and it is used by the Tutor to describe Medea's lamentation. Nonetheless, in tragedy the terms *thrênos* and *góos* are used interchangeably. See on this Alexiou 1974: 113n6; Swift 2010: 299-304, with more bibliography. For *Medea*, I follow the translation of Kovacs (1994).

¹² It has long been argued that uncontrolled female lament in Greek tragedy poses a threat to the male civic order of the community, see Foley 1993; Loraux 1998; Toher 2001: 332-3; Dué 2006: 30-2, 38, 41, 46-9. For the dangers that ritual lament possibly posed to the community, see Alexiou 1974: 20-3; Holst-Warhaft 2002: 2-3. For lament

in tragedy, in all three cases analyzed does not interfere with the external world of the *polis*. The singing heroines also seem to register their songs into different verbal genres¹³ which were usually sung.¹⁴ What these songs have in common is that they express intense emotions that threaten the existence of their *oikoi*.

In the opening lines of *Medea*, the eponymous heroine is in a terrible situation. Her husband, Jason, has abandoned their house and has the intention of marrying another woman. Medea's *oikos* is in danger of extinction or, as the Nurse dramatically states to the chorus of women, the house has already perished (139: οὐκ εἰσὶ δόμοι· φροῦδα τάδ' ἦδη).¹⁵ Her reaction is very intense. Medea remains in her chamber (141) and spends her time lamenting. Medea sings her song while she is inside the house. The Nurse and the women of the chorus describe her feelings and label their expression as a lamentation. Medea is said to be stirring up her feelings and her anger (99), to have been beaten by her sufferings (109-10), to be miserable (132: τὰς δυστάνου Κολχίδος; 149-50: δύστανος / μέλπει νύμφα),¹⁶ to feel wrath (172: χόλον; 176-7: βαρύθυμον ὀργάν / καὶ λῆμα φρενῶν) and grief (184: πένθος).¹⁷ Her reaction is opposed to speech. Medea does not listen to the soothing words of her friends and she refuses to be pacified¹⁸ (142-

expressing the concerns of the *genos* (natal family) as opposed to the interests of the *oikos* and the *polis*, see Alexiou 1974: 21-2. However, male efforts to control female lament only apply to public manifestations of grief – as examples from funerary legislation show – but certainly not to the family environment, that is, to the domestic ritual frame of the *prothesis*. For the relationship between funerary legislation and lamentation, see Alexiou 1974: 14-23.

¹³ Verbal genres are culturally recognized, routinized, and sometimes though not necessarily overtly marked and formalized categories of discourse in use in particular communities and societies. See Sherzer 1987 for a definition of verbal genres. See also McClure 1999: 32-69 for a discussion of verbal genres in Greek tragedy (e.g., lamentation, *aischrologia*, ritual song, gossip and seductive persuasion) and Chong-Gossard 2003; 2006 for the use of different verbal genres in Euripides' tragedy. For "women's speech" (the use of different speech from men by women) in Greek tragedy, see Mossman 2001.

¹⁴ In other words, their language bears 'lyrical markers', that is, features that are found in monodic and choral poetry from the archaic and classical period (see Nooter 2012: 1).

¹⁵ I follow the text of Murray. See Murray 1966: 139: "The house is no more: it has perished".

¹⁶ 132: "of the unhappy woman of Colchis"; 149-50: "the miserable woman".

¹⁷ 172: "wrath"; 176-7: "angry temper"; 184: "grief".

¹⁸ Chong-Gossard observes that it is characteristic of Euripidean singing women to refuse to accept the sympathy or take the advice of others in order to gain what he calls the "ownership" of their sufferings (2003: 209-11). For *mũthos* as speech, see LSJ s.v. *mũthos*.

3: φίλων οὐδενὸς οὐδὲν / παραθαλπομένα φρένα μύθοις; 173-5: πῶς ἂν ἐς ὄψιν τὰν ἀμετέραν / ἔλθοι μύθων τ' αὐδαθέντων / δέξαιτ' ὁμφάν; 187-9: καίτοι τοκάδος δέργμα λεαίνης / ἀποταυροῦται δμωσίν, ὅταν τις / μῦθον προφέρων πέλας ὀρμηθῇ).¹⁹ She does nothing but lament (107-8: νέφος οἰμωγῆς ὡς τάχ' ἀνάψει / μείζονι θυμῷ; 131: ἐκλυον φωνάν, ἐκλυον δὲ βοάν; 135-6: βοάν / ἐκλυον; 150: μέλπει; 158-9: μὴ λίαν / τάκου δυρομένα σὸν εὐνάταν; 168: κλύεθ' οἷα λέγει κάπιβοᾶται; 204-6: ἰαχὰν ἄιον πολύστονον γόων, / λιγυρὰ δ' ἄχεα μογερά βοᾷ / τὸν ἐν λέχει προδόταν κακόνυμφον).²⁰

Part of the description of Medea's lyrical lament is conveyed lyrically by the chorus (132, 149-50, 158-9, 173-5, 176-7, 204-6). 'Sympathetic' tragic choruses, that is, choruses who emotionally participate in the sufferings of a character, typically appear after the prologue and, usually, have a consolatory function (see Cerbo 2012: 280-1).²¹ This also seems to be the case here. Mastronarde has used the term "three-way exchange" in order to describe the "triangulation" of song in the *parodos* (2002: 189), since Medea is absorbed in her own emotions and has no awareness of her listeners (the Nurse and the chorus members) and their comments. Medea has strong motives for singing since she is a female who suffers excessively in a Greek tragedy.²² Her activity is also designated as singing, mainly lamenting, by the Nurse and the chorus, as I already mentioned. The chorus perceives Medea's activity as singing as it is obvious by the use of a Greek tragic term designating song (μέλπει)²³ to describe Medea's utterance: according to the chorus, Medea is a miserable woman who sings (149-50).²⁴

¹⁹ 142-3: "her heart in no way soothed by the words of any of her friends"; 173-5: "Oh, how I wish she could come face to face with us and receive the sound of our words to her"; 187-9: "though she glowers at the servants with the look of a lioness with cubs when any of them approaches her with something to say".

²⁰ 107-8: "she will soon kindle with even greater passion the cloud of lament"; 131: "I have heard the voice, I have heard the cry"; 135-6: "I heard her shooting"; 150 "utters"; 158-9: "Do not grieve excessively or weep over your husband"; 168: "Do you hear what she says"; 204-6: "I have heard her cry full of groans, how she utters shrill charges against the husband who betrayed her bed".

²¹ On sympathetic choruses who intervene in Euripides' plays, see also Pattoni 1989, especially 42-45 and 76-79 for *Medea*.

²² "What a wail the miserable woman utters".

²³ Barner (1971: 292) has collected some Greek tragic terms designating song. See also Hall (2002: 7) for tragedy's internal clues to the ways in which the voice of the actor was used.

²⁴ Νύμφα was used to describe either a young wife or a bride (see LSJ s.v. νύμφη). Although it is not used here with the latter meaning, the word certainly has marital connotations. For the conflation of the motifs of marriage and death in Greek tragedy, see Rehm 1994.

It is clear that Medea does sing.²⁵ She uses lyric anapaests (96-7, 111-4, 144-7, 160-7), that is, a metre linked to lamentation in Euripides' tragedies (see Lourenço 2011: 31, 42). The content of Medea's song is also close to lamentation. As Alexiou suggests, Medea's song is a 'dirge' for herself; Medea, like other tragic heroes or heroines, laments her own fate or impending death (see Alexiou 1974: 113). Medea begins with a preliminary address to herself (96-7: *ιώ, / δύστανος ἐγώ*),²⁶ laments her ill fate (97: *μελέα τε πόνων*; 111-12: *ἔπαθον τλάμων ἔπαθον μεγάλων / ἄξι' ὀδυρμῶν*),²⁷ states that she wishes to die at 98 (*ιώ μοί μοι, πῶς ἂν ὀλοίμαν*),²⁸ and 143-7:

αἰαῖ;
 διά μου κεφαλᾶς φλόξ οὐρανία
 βαίη· τί δέ μοι ζῆν ἔτι κέρδος;
 φεῦ φεῦ· θανάτῳ καταλυσάιμαν
 βιοτᾶν στυγερὰν προλιποῦσα.

[Oh! May a flash of lightning pierce my head! What profit any longer for me in life? Ah, ah! may I find my rest in death and leave behind my hateful life!]

She remembers her past, her union with Jason and the sacrifices she made for him²⁹ (161-3: *μεγάλοις ὅρκους / ἐνδησαμένα τὸν κατάρατον / πόσιν*; 166-7: *ὦ πάτερ, ὦ πόλις, ὦν ἀπενάσθην / αἰσχυρῶς τὸν ἐμὸν κτείνασα κάσιν*),³⁰ combining some of the central aspects of ritual laments (see Alexiou 1974: 133-4). Medea's song is not set in a tone of restraint and moderation, but rather in one of intense and personal grief. She contaminates her lament with the language of oaths³¹ (160-3: *ὦ μεγάλα Θέμι καὶ πότνι' Ἄρτεμι / λεύσσεθ' ἅ πάσχω, μεγάλοις ὅρκους / ἐνδησαμένα τὸν κατάρατον / πόσιν*)³² and with the language of curses. She uses the language of curses against her whole house and its members (112-14: *ὦ κατάρατοι /*

²⁵ This is clear by the Doric forms encountered in Medea's anapaests (e.g., *δύστανος*, 97; *τλάμων*, 112).

²⁶ "Oh, what a wretch am I".

²⁷ 97: "how miserable in my sorrows"; 111-12: "Oh, what sufferings are mine, sufferings that call for loud lamentation".

²⁸ "Ah ah, how I wish I could die".

²⁹ Medea's and Jason's marriage does not seem to be a traditional one. Here Medea states that she has pledged him with oaths. See on this Boedeker 1991: 96.

³⁰ "I who have bound my accursed husband with mighty oaths"; 166-7: "O father, O my native city, from you I departed in shame, having killed my brother".

³¹ For oaths as linguistic markers of women's speech, see Sommerstein 1995. On how oaths are manipulated in tragedy, see Fletcher 2003.

³² "O mighty Themis and my lady Artemis, do you see what I suffer, I who have bound my accursed husband with mighty oaths?".

παῖδες ὀλοισθε στυγεράς ματρὸς / σὺν πατρί, καὶ πᾶς δόμος ἔρροι)³³ and against her husband, his new bride and their new house (162-4: τὸν κατάρατον / πόσιν· ὃν ποτ' ἐγὼ νύμφαν τ' ἐσίδοιμ' / αὐτοῖς μελάθροισ διακναιομένου).³⁴ Medea expresses in her song her wish to end her *oikos* including her children, her husband and herself. Medea does not stop here. She also sings of her wish to destroy the new *oikos* of Jason: she wishes harm to Jason, his new bride and their new household. Medea's song is not simply imbued with threats of violence against her and Jason's *oikoi*.³⁵ In addition to this, Medea seems nostalgic of her natal family, her *genos* that she harmed by killing her brother and of her *polis* that she abandoned (166-7).

Phaedra is also in a dreadful state. Her husband is absent from their *oikos*.³⁶ According to the chorus of women, she stays inside the house, refuses to eat, covers her head and wishes to die (131-40). They believe that Phaedra suffers from a disease which forces her to remain inside the house (131-2: τειρομένην νοσερᾷ κοίτᾳ δέμας ἐντὸς ἔχειν / οἴκων).³⁷ Phaedra is carried outside the house by the Nurse and the chorus notices that she is extremely unhappy. Her body is ravaged, and its colour has changed (170-5). The Nurse states that it was Phaedra's wish to come outside the house (176-85). She speaks of an illness, too (179-80: νοσερᾷς / δέμνια κοίτης; 186: νοσεῖν).³⁸ According to the Nurse, Phaedra is moody and finds contentment in nothing. Phaedra orders the servants to raise up her body, to hold her head erect and to take off her head-dress because she wants her tresses to be spread upon her shoulders (198-202). These orders are not simply

³³ "O accursed children of a hateful mother, may you perish with your father and the whole house collapse in ruin!"

³⁴ "My accursed husband / may I one day see him and his new bride ground to destruction, and their whole house with them". Not all curses were sung, but singing was often used in non-literary curses and in literary curses. Faraone is of the opinion that during the classical times, or even earlier, there was a tradition of hexametrical incantations which combined epic vocabulary, performative syntax and traditional Greek magical *praxis* (1995: 11; see also Faraone 2004). For literary curses, see the seminal work of Watson 1991. For women being associated with especially privileged language such as prophecy and prayer (including curses) in early Greek thought, see Chong-Gossard 2003: 210n1; Goldhill 2004a: 35. For the use of curses in *Medea*, see Boedeker 1991: 100.

³⁵ Medea wishes to wipe out Jason's present and future children, as Segal rightly observes (1996: 18, 25). Medea in killing her children attacks the males of the household at their weakest point.

³⁶ Disaster striking during the husband's absence from the *oikos* is a familiar motif of Greek tragedy: see Mossman 1996; Skouromouni 2014: 390.

³⁷ "She lies afflicted, they say, in a bed of sickness and keeps indoors". For *Hippolytus* I follow Kovacs' translation (1995).

³⁸ 179-80: "sick-bed"; 186: "sick".

indicative of her emotional state. Unveiling in drama often occurs as a response to death and as an expression of grief or operates as a sign of the loss of status and vulnerability.³⁹ According to her, her limbs are unstrung (199: λέλυμαι μελέων σύνδεσμα φίλων). Goff has persuasively argued that Phaedra's loosening of her body and veils acts as a prelude to the loosening of her tongue during her 'delirium'. She considers this as a manifestation of *lysimeles* Eros.⁴⁰ *Lysimeles* Eros or *pothos* (desire) was a common motif encountered in archaic lyric poetry.⁴¹ Phaedra then expresses her profound emotional distress in lyric anapaests (208-31), a metre that has threnodic connotations or expresses deep emotional distress.

What Phaedra really desires is not just to get out into the fresh air, as the Nurse suggests. She has a series of unusual cravings. She sings of her desire to drink pure water from a dewy spring and to rest lying under the poplar trees in the uncut meadow (208-11). This meadow evokes a site of erotic encounter familiar from lyric poetry.⁴² She also wishes to go to the mountains in order to hunt wild beasts (215-22). Her other wish is to go to the ground of Artemis in order to tame Enetic horses (228-31). The taming of horses clearly has erotic overtones and may be a possible allusion to a poetic motif known from archaic lyric poetry (see Segal 1965: 125, 163n23). Modern scholars have long associated Phaedra's irrational cravings with her hidden love for Hippolytus.⁴³ All she wants is to find herself as far as possible from the house, in places where her desires can be fulfilled.⁴⁴ Although Phaedra's song does not directly threaten the existence of the *oikos*, it becomes a means to signal her forbidden desire for Hippolytus. Phaedra threatens the house as a potential adulteress (see Goff 1990: 5). She also expresses her desire to get away from the house, and from the norms of organized society. She seems to wish for the life of an adolescent (see Goff 1990: 7) or for the life of a Bacchant,⁴⁵ but not for that of a house-

³⁹ See Finglass 2009: 275-6, 278; Skouroumouni 2016: 10.

⁴⁰ See Pigeaud 1976: 8; Goff 1990: 5-7; McClure 1999: 126.

⁴¹ See Alcman fr. 3.61-2 *PMGF*; Archilochus fr. 196 W.; Sappho fr. 130 V.

⁴² See Berns 1973: 62-3; Bremer 1975; Segal 1965: 124-5; McClure 1999: 126. For meadows as persistent erotic images in Greek literature, see Motte 1973: 45-8, 85; Calame 1999: 151-74.

⁴³ See Dodds 1925: 102; Knox 1952: 6; Segal 1965: 124-5, 130, 144-7; Glenn 1976; Segal 1978: 137-8; Zeitlin 1985: 74; Goff 1990: 31-4; Swift 2006: 137; McClure 1999: 125-7.

⁴⁴ Contemporary scholars have noticed that Phaedra's desires can only be fulfilled far from domestic territory: see Zeitlin 1985: 74; Goff 1990: 7. Phaedra can fulfill her love in the world of fantasy far from reality (see Glenn 1976: 436), in an idealized location (see Swift 2006: 137; 2009: 370), outside society or in the wilderness (see Segal 1965: 125).

⁴⁵ See Schlesier 1993: 109-10 for the maenadic imagery in *Hippolytus*. According to her, maenadic imagery in tragedy has associations with female violence against the

wife. It is worth noticing that both adolescents and Bacchantes were, in real life and in Greek tragedy, associated with singing.⁴⁶

Hermione finds herself trapped in a dreadful situation. Neoptolemus is absent from the house. Her plan to murder Andromache and her son has been revealed, and her father and accomplice, Menelaus, has abandoned her. Hermione had tried to eliminate serious threats to her household, the concubine of her husband and her son with Neoptolemus, but her plan to save her *oikos* has gone awry. Before their lyric exchange, the Nurse describes Hermione's situation: Hermione wants to die because she is afraid that her husband may send her away in disgrace from their *oikos* (807-10). She had already attempted suicide inside her house, but she had been restrained by her servants (811-15). According to the Nurse, Hermione is in great pain (814). Her duty is to restrain her mistress from the noose (816: δέσποιναν εἴργουσ' ἀγγόνης κάμνω).⁴⁷ The chorus of women hears the servants shouting from inside the house (820-1). According to the chorus, Hermione laments her deeds (822-3: στένει / πράξασα δεινά).⁴⁸ They announce that Hermione is coming outside the house in order to communicate her sufferings (822: δείξειν δ' ἔοικεν ἢ τάλαιν' ὅσον στένει).⁴⁹

Hermione then starts her song which is composed of a combination of various Aeolic metres with dactylic metres, dochmiacs and lyric iambics (825-65). Her song is constantly interrupted by the speech of her Nurse (she uses iambic trimetre). The first thing Hermione sings about is her attempt to disfigure herself: she threatens to tear her hair and scratch her cheeks with her nails (825-6). She also sings about what she does on stage, casting her veil away (829-31), like Phaedra in her 'scene of delirium' and other tragic heroines in moments of despair.⁵⁰ Furthermore, this particular attire was part of her dowry, as Hermione has stressed earlier in the play (147-53). Hermione's attire is a symbol of her attachment to her father and of her

members of the household. On the latter, see also Seaford 1993. Marinis persuasively argues that there is a connection between the lamenting women and the conceptual realm of maenadism, especially in Greek tragedy, see 2012: 34-5.

⁴⁶ As Hall notes, certain characters (especially virgins) seem almost pre-programmed to sing in tragedy (1999: 121). One of the activities of the Bacchantes in Greek tragedy was singing, as we can observe in Euripides' *Bacchae*. Antigone describes herself as a mourning Bacchant in her monody in Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (1485-92).

⁴⁷ "I for my part am weary with restraining her from the noose".

⁴⁸ "She laments over the terrible deeds she has done".

⁴⁹ "But it is likely that the poor woman will make plain how she laments".

⁵⁰ Skouroumouni regards that this act reminds the audience of Clytemnestra's act in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 1266 (2016: 10n36). Clytemnestra was considered a wicked female. Contemporary scholars have underlined Clytemnestra's manipulation of language in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, see on the latter Thalmann 1985: 226; McClure 1997: 123-5; Goldhill 2004a: 35; Goldhill 2004b: 41-2, 75-8.

problematic marriage to Neoptolemus.⁵¹ Hermione also loses her gown and exposes her breasts. Her gesture is completely inappropriate within her culture, but she lacks any social decorum.⁵² Hermione's gesture also brings to mind her mother, Helen, the unsuitable wife *par excellence* who had made the same gesture when she was in an analogous position.⁵³ Her problem is not that she exposed her body, but that her sins against her husband have been exposed (833-5).⁵⁴ Hermione displays exaggerated grief by tearing her clothes and by lacerating herself. Similar displays of grief were familiar from ritual lament.⁵⁵

Hermione states that she laments her daring and uses the language of curses against herself. Because of her deeds, she is cursed in the eyes of mortals (837-9):

κατὰ μὲν οὖν στένω
δαΐας τόλμας, ἄν' ἔρεξ'.
ὦ κατάρατος ἐγὼ κατάρ-
ρατος ἀνθρώποις.

[I groan for my bloodthirsty daring, the daring I wrought, I accursed, accursed in the eyes of mortals!]

She imagines her dim future, a motif well-known from ritual laments (see Alexiou 1974: 133-4). She is certain that her husband will kill her and she sings of her fantasies of escaping her husband by death. Hermione wishes to commit suicide by striking her heart, by hanging (841-4), by entering a pyre, by leaping from a cliff into the sea or in the mountain woods so that she will be taken care of by the ones who will collect her body (846-50).⁵⁶

⁵¹ See on this Battezzato 1999-2000: 358-9; Papadimitropoulos 2006: 151; Skouroumouni 2016: 8-9. For Hermione's problematic attachment to her natal family (*genos*), see also Kyriakou 1997: 11.

⁵² For the impropriety of her gesture, see Wiles 1997: 201; Battezzato 1999-2000: 359; Lloyd 2005: 155; Skouroumouni 2016: 11-12.

⁵³ See on this Kovacs 1980: 71; Papadimitropoulos 2006: 152; Skouroumouni 2016: 12. Peleus speaks of Helen's gesture towards Menelaus earlier in the play (627-31).

⁵⁴ Skouroumouni remarks that visible nude breasts are actually a rare sight in Greek tragedy; hence, the exposure of Hermione's breast is a very powerful visual image that generates associations with the scenic presentation of another important wicked female of the Spartan family: Aeschylus' Clytemnestra. Her exposed *mastos* in Aeschylus' *Choephora* (896-8) is the single other extant instance of such an act on the tragic stage. See Skouroumouni 2016: 111.

⁵⁵ See Alexiou 1974: 20-3; Swift 2010: 304-5.

⁵⁶ Chong-Gossard rightly remarks that the means of death that Hermione invokes are notably traditional in extant tragedy. Hermione seems to seek for grandeur in her death-wishes (2003: 225). She also recalls previous tragic moments of despair (e.g., Medea's wish to be struck by lightning, *Medea* 144). Hermione prefers to kill herself, em-

She laments the betrayal of her father and her future death at the hands of her husband (854-6: ἔλιπες ἔλιπες, ὦ πάτερ, ἐπακτίαν / [ῶσει] μονάδ' ἔρημον οὔσαν ἐνάλου κώπας. / ὀλεῖ ὀλεῖ με).⁵⁷ Her main concern is the possible change of her status⁵⁸ as she believes that she will be expelled from her *oikos* (856-7: τᾷδ' οὐκέτ' ἐνοικήσω / νυμφιδίῳ στέγῃ).⁵⁹ Instead of the mistress of the *oikos*, she will end up being a suppliant or a slave (859-60: τίνος ἀγαλμάτων ἰκέτις ὀρμαθῶ; / ἢ δούλα δούλας γόνασι προσπέσω;).⁶⁰ She also wishes to escape from this difficult situation by flight. Hermione wishes to fly to the Dark Rocks (Cyaneae), often identified with the Wandering Rocks (Planctae) and Clashing Rocks (Symplegades) in lines 861-5. Hermione's escapism expressed in a lyric form reminds us of other lyric moments of 'escapism' in Greek tragedy.⁶¹ Hermione's song does not only bring to mind other lyric moments of Greek tragedy, but also employs the language and the themes of lament.⁶²

Consolation-Offering Nurses

While Medea sings in anapaests inside her house, her Nurse is outside with the chorus and chants in order to comfort and soothe her.⁶³ Her use of metre reveals her emotional status. Although she tries to be more rational, she seems to be very involved in Medea's sufferings. She tries to offer her comfort by using speech and chanting. Her aim is to persuade her mistress to come out of the house in order to meet the women of the chorus (185: ἀτὰρ

bracing the tragic genre by dying as women in tragedy do, and not to become a scheming wife murdered by her husband (see Chong-Gossard 2003: 227).

⁵⁷ "You have abandoned me, father, abandoned me, all alone on the shore with no sea-going oar! He will kill me, kill me!"

⁵⁸ Chong-Gossard 2003: 214 observed that for some of the female singers of Euripides' tragedies (Hermione included) their intense fear for the loss of their status triggered their singing.

⁵⁹ "No more shall I dwell in this bridal house of mine!"

⁶⁰ "To which of the gods' statues shall I run as suppliant? Or shall I fall as a slave before the knees of my slave?"

⁶¹ The desire to be transformed into a bird and escape by flight through the air is a common wish of choruses and actors in tragedy, and it is always articulated in lyrics (see Chong-Gossard 2003: 225). For escape odes in Greek tragedy, see Knight 1933; for escape odes in Euripides, see Padel 1974; Swift 2009.

⁶² See Hausdoerffer 2006.

⁶³ I should note that the Nurse does not use iambic trimetres since Medea's first intervention from within the house (96-7); all lines uttered by the Nurse from line 99 until the end of the *parodos* – that is, until the very last line she utters in the play – are anapaestic. The mode of expression of the Nurse is not iambic. She does not speak, she chants.

φόβος εἰ πείσω δέσποιναν ἐμήν).⁶⁴ The Nurse intervenes amidst Medea's shouting and lamenting (99-111, 115-31, 140-3, 169-73) in order to comment on it. In the anapaestic scene that leads up to the *parodos* (96-130) and during the *parodos* itself (131-213), Medea's lines are heard and commented upon by the Nurse, first by the Nurse alone and then by the Nurse and the chorus. Medea seems unable or unwilling to hear them.⁶⁵

The Nurse comments on Medea's sufferings trying to adopt a philosophical tone. According to the Nurse, every proud soul stung by an injury will react passionately (105-10); royalty even more since they often command and seldom obey, and so are subject to violent changes of mood (119-24); the gods get angry at non-moderate living and they often destroy royal *oikoi* (119-30). She advises moderation and living a modest life of equality.⁶⁶ Regarding Medea's tirade against her children (112-14), she offers a rational argument in that her children do not share their father's sin and thus she has no reason to hate them (116-17: τί δέ σοι παῖδες πατρὸς ἀμπλακίας / μετέχουσι; τί τοῦσδ' ἔχθεις;).⁶⁷ The chorus asks her to bring Medea outside the house in order to listen to their words (173-6: πῶς ἄν ἐς ὄψιν τὰν ἀμετέραν / ἔλθοι μύθων τ' αὐδαθέντων / δέξαιτ' ὁμόφην).⁶⁸ According to the chorus, Medea's malicious intentions conveyed by her song have the potential to harm the members of her *oikos* (181-4). Both the chorus and the Nurse believe that the antidote to Medea's song is the language of persuasion. The Nurse will try to bring Medea outside and to persuade her, although she doubts that Medea is perceptive of her words. Medea uses song, but the Nurse seems to doubt the effectiveness of song to soothe Medea. She speaks of the inability of song to put an end to mortals' bitter grief (190-204). As Mastronarde has suggested, the Nurse seems too directly involved in the event to derive solace or pleasure from music (2002: *ad* 190-204), and she supposes that the same is true for Medea. According to the Nurse, grief that cannot be cured with song can overthrow houses (197-8: ἐξ

⁶⁴ "But there is doubt whether I shall persuade my mistress".

⁶⁵ See Mastronarde's comment *ad* 131-213 (2002: 189): "Medea's lines sung from inside turn the *parodos* into a three-way exchange. Medea is absorbed in her own emotions and has no awareness of her listeners and their comments as she continues to sing in anapaests".

⁶⁶ The philosophical tone of the speech of the Nurse can be compared to the tone adopted by the lyric genre of *thrênos*. Lyric *thrênos* avoided expressions of personal grief and adopted a philosophical tone (e.g., Simonides often refers to the inevitability of death and suffering in human life and to the quick changes of fate: 520, 521, 523, 524 *PMG*). On the differences between ritual lament and *thrênos*, see Swift 2010: 310-4.

⁶⁷ "Why do you make the children sharers in their father's sin? Why do you hate them?"

⁶⁸ "Oh, how I wish she could come face to face with us and receive the sound of our words to her, on the chance that somehow she might give up her angry temper!"

ὧν θάνατοι / δειναί τε τύχαι σφάλλουσι δόμους).⁶⁹

Phaedra's song is interrupted by her Nurse's speech (203-7, 212-14, 223-7, 232-8). The Nurse, in response to Phaedra's 'delirium', offers her arguments using a variety of metres (mostly dimeters and a monometer at 212 and a few paroemiac lines: 227, 238). She believes that her mistress is afflicted by an illness (205) and that Phaedra is on the brink of madness (214, 232, 237-8).⁷⁰ She adopts a philosophical tone and remarks that every mortal has to suffer (206-8). All Phaedra has to do is to stop uttering her cravings. According to the Nurse, Phaedra should stand still and not move violently (203-5: καὶ μὴ χαλεπῶς / μετάβαλλε δέμας),⁷¹ she should stop performing her wild words that are created by madness in front of an audience (212-4: ὦ παῖ, τί θροεῖς; / οὐ μὴ παρ' ὄχλῳ τάδε γηρύσῃ / μανίας ἔποχον ῥίπτουσα λόγον);⁷² and she should stop expressing her wild cravings for things that are outside the house (224-7).⁷³ According to the Nurse, Phaedra should stay calm, express herself in a moderate way (205-7) and settle for things that are close to her household: for example, she should drink at the well near the city (225-7). Phaedra has nothing to do with hunting and with drinking from flowing springs. She should stay within the sheltered world of the *polis*. Phaedra should be pleased with the things that belong to her

⁶⁹ "It is because of these griefs that deaths and terrible disasters overthrow houses". Contemporary scholars have noticed that the Nurse does not accidentally comment on the inadequacy of song to bring a solution to Medea's problems. The Nurse is a connoisseur of the poetry of previous mortal men. The target of her statement seems to involve both epic and lyric poetry, both sung in festivals and banquets according to Pournara-Karydas (1998: 110n148) and she understands the therapeutic notion of poetry according to Pucci 1980: 25-6. Nevertheless, her personal involvement expressed by the metres she uses makes her unable to find a solution to Medea's problems.

⁷⁰ It is worth mentioning that Phaedra's speech in these lines has been considered the speech of a mad woman by many contemporary scholars. It has been characterized a 'delirium'. See for example Knox 1952; Barrett's 1964 commentary on these lines; Segal 1965: 436; Goff 1990: 7; Halleran 1995 on the passage; McClure 1999: 125-6. Nevertheless, Roisman sees Phaedra's statements as a ruse for madness: she believes that Phaedra's rhetoric indicates that she is in full control of herself (1998: 50-1).

⁷¹ "Do not shift your body so roughly".

⁷² "My child, what are these words of yours? Won't you stop saying such things before the crowd, hurling wild words that are mounted on madness?" Γηρύω usually means 'sing' (see LSJ s.v. γηρύω). McClure 1999: 126 suggests that since Phaedra's speech is eroticized, once it breaches the discursive sphere of men, becomes transgressive both in its content and in the fact of its public disclosure, it must be confined to the house.

⁷³ The Nurse has also remarked that her mistress desires things that are far away (183-5: ταχὺ γὰρ σφάλλῃ κοῦδενὶ χαίρεις, / οὐδέ σ' ἀρέσκει τὸ παρόν, τὸ δ' ἀπὸν / φίλτερον ἡγή, "for you slip all too soon from contentment, and you find joy in nothing, taking no pleasure in what is at hand but loving rather what is far off").

oikos and not to the wilderness (see Swift 2006: 137n55). The Nurse is very critical of Phaedra's song. She finds Phaedra's words inappropriate and puzzling (214: μανίας ἔποχον ρίπτουσα λόγον; 232: παράφρων ἔρριψας ἔπος; 236-8, τάδε μαντείας ἄξια πολλῆς, / ὅστις σε θεῶν ἀνασειράζει / καὶ παρακόπτει φρένας, ὦ παῖ)⁷⁴ and wants her to stop (213). Phaedra's Nurse is anxious that Phaedra and Theseus' children will not receive their rightful inheritance in case their mother dies. As there will be no one to defend their rights, such rights could be usurped by their stepbrother, Hippolytus, the Amazon's son (305-9).

Hermione's Nurse in *Andromache* advises her mistress and disapproves of her exaggerations using iambic trimetre. She interrupts Hermione's song to prevent her from grieving, though Hermione seems unresponsive to her words.⁷⁵ She wants Hermione to stop displaying signs of excessive grief, such as self-lacerating and tearing off her veil (829, 832). The Nurse adopts a philosophical tone towards misfortunes: misfortunes sent by the gods come to all mortals late or soon, so Hermione should stop grieving in this way (851-2: τί ταῦτα μοχθεῖς; συμφοραὶ θεήλατοι / πᾶσιν βροτοῖσιν ἢ τότ' ἤλθον ἢ τότε).⁷⁶ The Nurse offers her rational advice to her mistress in that she will be forgiven by Neoptolemus (840) and she will not lose her status as the mistress of the *oikos* (867-78). According to the Nurse, although Hermione has a rival in love whom she shares her marriage with (836: συγγάμω), Neoptolemus is her husband (840, 869: πόσις). Hermione is the mistress of the house and not the other woman, a barbarian prisoner taken from Troy (870-1). Hermione's marital union is stronger because Neoptolemus has received her with a large dowry for her: she is the daughter of a man of importance, and comes from a wealthy city (872-3: ἀλλ' ἀνδρὸς ἐσθλοῦ παῖδα σὺν πολλοῖς λαβῶν / ἔδνοισι, πόλεώς τ' οὐ μέσως εὐδαίμονος).⁷⁷ According to the Nurse, Menelaus has not abandoned Hermione and he will not allow her to be banished from her *oikos* (874-5: πατήρ δέ σ' οὐχ ὥδ' ὥς σὺ δειμαίνεις, τέκνον, / προδοὺς ἐάσει δωμάτων τῶνδ' ἐκπεσεῖν).⁷⁸ All Hermione has to do is to go inside and stop perform-

⁷⁴ 214: "hurling wild words that are mounted on madness"; 232: "What whirling words are these you utter yet again in your madness?"; 236-8: "All this calls for a skillful diviner to say which of the gods is wrenching your head aside, my child, and striking your wits awry". The Nurse in *Hippolytus* has also stated that Phaedra's words need a seer to interpret them (346).

⁷⁵ For Hermione's self-absorption in this scene, see Chong-Gossard 2003: 224.

⁷⁶ "Why do you grieve this way? Misfortunes sent by the gods come to all mortals late or soon".

⁷⁷ "But he has received you with a large dowry and you are the daughter of a man of importance and come from a city of no ordinary prosperity".

⁷⁸ "Your father will not, as you fear, abandon you and allow you to be banished from

ing her song in front of her house (876-7: ἀλλ' εἴσιθ' εἴσω μηδὲ φαντάζου δόμων / πάροιθε τῶνδε, μή τιν' αἰσχύνῃν λάβῃς).⁷⁹ According to the Nurse, Hermione's excessive feelings as expressed by her song endanger her status (877).⁸⁰

Heroines in Dialogue and the Destruction of the *Oikos*

All three Nurses urge their mistresses to abandon the emotional state from which their singing arises: vindictive rage in the case of *Medea*; a refusal to keep living and an illicit desire in the case of *Phaedra*, and excessive fear of being punished in the case of *Hermione*. Nurses encourage rational thinking. *Medea*, *Phaedra*, and *Hermione* comply⁸¹ and they, eventually, stop singing. The cessation of their songs, however, cannot save their *oikoi*. The heroines switch verbal genre and they slip into speech. This is marked by a change in metre: they start to use iambic trimetre. Their new mode of expression, nevertheless, becomes the vehicle of the destruction in their households.

Medea is persuaded to stop lamenting. She exits her house and speaks of her troubles to the women of the chorus (214-66). *Medea* uses a different form of discourse which allows her to reveal her power of persuasion.⁸² She uses rational arguments in order to convince the chorus to keep silent if she finds a way to get justice from Jason (259-63). *Medea* insists on the binding nature of the 'contract' she made on her own with Jason (228-30, 252-66) and defends her right to honour and self-esteem in terms resembling those of the male heroic code.⁸³ Her song and her emotions are restrained. Her speech is the vehicle for the destruction of her *oikos*. Rational speech, not lament, aids her in setting her revenge in action.⁸⁴ In her

this house".

⁷⁹ "But go inside and do not show yourself in front of this house lest you disgrace yourself". *Hermione*, as Neoptolemus' legal wife, has to dominate inside the house. For the "dynamics of domestic space" in Euripides' *Andromache*, see Skouroumouni 2014.

⁸⁰ The main concern of the Nurse is that *Hermione* will retain the dignity appropriate to her status as a member of royalty and of the female gender. See on this Cyrino 1998: 86-8; Chong-Gossard 2003: 224; Skouroumouni 2016: 11-2.

⁸¹ Pournara-Karydas persuasively argues that Nurses in Greek tragedy had authority over their mistresses (1998: 83-92).

⁸² For the fascination of Euripides' *Medea* with language, its dangers and powers, see Boedeker 1991: 97. For *Medea*'s power of persuasion, see Buxton 1982: 153-170; Boedeker 1991: 99-100; Rabinowitz 1993: 142-4, 153; Fletcher 2003: 33; Levett 2010.

⁸³ See Knox 1977: 198-225; Zeitlin 1985: 68; Segal 1996: 27-8. For the affinities of the use of *Medea*'s language with the language of men, see also Williamson 1990.

⁸⁴ As Levett correctly remarks (2010: 55), *Medea* learns to restrain and control her

speech, she identifies the root of her unhappiness with the loss of her natal *oikos* and her having to remain in her new *oikos* and *polis* (252-8). She calmly states that she will find a solution to her problems (260-6). It is known from the myth that Medea is going to extinguish the new *oikos* of her husband by murdering his new wife and destroy her own *oikos* by killing her children. At the end of the play, she will depart from the *polis* on the dragon chariot of her immortal ancestor, the Sun.

Phaedra, once she stops singing, enters into a dialogue with her Nurse (310-61). The dialogue is of a stichomythic nature for almost its entire extent: from 315 to 352 (with distichomythic start at 311/312+313/314 and *antilabē* at 352).⁸⁵ The self-absorbed and unresponsive singer communicates with another person. Phaedra articulates her problems, eventually, revealing the root of her anxiety; she is in love with Hippolytus (350-3). Despite the concerns of her Nurse, Phaedra's enigmatic song allowed her to conceal the reason for her grief. Her dialogue with the Nurse is the means of the destruction of the *oikos*.⁸⁶ Rabinowitz has rightly remarked that although Phaedra had vowed silence, the play depicts her shift into language, first with unwilling speech (in her lyric 'delirium scene'), then with mediated speech (in this dialogue with her Nurse), then with writing (see Rabinowitz 1987: 131). Phaedra will try to become an adulteress in order to satiate her passion for Hippolytus, as other women who come from her natal family did in similar cases of forbidden love (337-41) and she will endanger her *oikos* with Theseus. The revelation of her desire will stimulate the Nurse into seeking a cure for her mistress' illness. Phaedra will also use different modes of expression and, eventually, she will destroy her *oikos* by committing suicide and implicating Hippolytus.

Hermione stops singing and she engages in a dialogue with her cousin Orestes, a member of her natal *oikos*, who suddenly comes to her house (881-1008). Hermione uses supplication (891-5) and then explains her misfortunes to Orestes. According to her, she is to blame, in part, with her husband, and in part with one of the gods (902-3). The causes of her grief are

own words, hiding her true intentions as she effects her revenge, in particular by suppressing her 'feminine' instinct to lament.

⁸⁵ Although not one of Euripides' most complex stichomythiae, this is an interesting one, both for its structure and the proxemic change at 353: Phaedra to her Nurse: 2/2x1 + 1/1x15 + *extra metrum* + 1/1x4 + *antilabē*. Regarding this dialogue, a clear distinction between speech and song is impossible to be made. The Nurse seems to mix rhetoric discourse (lines 358-9 until the caesura) with elements encountered in lyric song (e.g., the re-echoing in clausula at 353/361, caesurae followed by repetitions in 354 and 355 with enjambement).

⁸⁶ As other scholars have noted, Phaedra's speech is what sets the tragedy in motion. See Rabinowitz 1987: 131-4; Goff 1990: 13; Fletcher 2003: 36-7; Mueller 2011: 150.

her marital problems (906-10) and the approach she used to solve them (910-19). She then implores Orestes, a member of her *genos* (921: ὁμόγνιον),⁸⁷ to escort her to any place far away from this land or to take her back to her father's house.⁸⁸ Hermione is certain that she has already destroyed her *oikos* with Neoptolemus. She feels that even the house seems to take voice and drive her away (924: δόμοι τ' ἐλάυνειν φθέγμ' ἔχοντες οἶδε με).⁸⁹ All she wants is to be driven away by her *oikos* in order to escape the wrath of Neoptolemus and Peleus (989-92). Orestes, who wishes to take revenge over Neoptolemus for marrying Hermione, will destroy this *oikos* by killing Neoptolemus and he will use Hermione to build a new household. It is Hermione's speech and not her song that reveals her latent condescension to Orestes' desire to marry her and urges Orestes to reveal his plot to murder Neoptolemus.⁹⁰

Conclusions

Medea, Phaedra and Hermione express their anxieties and grief in song. Their songs have affinities with some of the private expressions of ritual lament, especially Medea's and Hermione's songs, and they resonate with many different verbal genres (e.g., ritual lament, oaths, and curses) that are considered feminine. They also resonate with several kinds of lyric and dramatic poetry. All three heroines are self-absorbed in their songs and seem unresponsive to their Nurses. They also mention their natal family in their songs. Medea had to sacrifice members of her natal family and abandon her *polis*. Phaedra is afraid that she will follow the familiar pattern of fulfilling her desire for a lover who is, for some reason, forbidden. Hermione is extremely attached to her natal *oikos*. All three heroines are not in their native land and are far away from their natal *oikos*. They do not seem to fit in well in their new *oikoi*. Medea's marriage is borderline legitimate and Jason wants to create a new union; Phaedra has fallen in love with her stepson, while Hermione is barren and shares her husband with another woman.⁹¹ Their attachment to their *genos* seems problematic, especially in Her-

⁸⁷ "Who is of our family".

⁸⁸ Hermione's wish is to get away from her problematic union with Neoptolemus and to join her natal family once again. See Kyriakou 1997: 11.

⁸⁹ "For this house seems to take voice and drive me forth".

⁹⁰ For Hermione's latent consent to marry Orestes and her attitude that have as a result Orestes' revealing of his plan, see Papadimitropoulos 2006: 152-3.

⁹¹ Some of the common problems of the *oikos* in Greek tragedy were the failure of monogamy (by the relationship of a man with another woman or vice versa), acts of violence and disappearance through the lack of male heirs. See on this Seaford 1990: 151-2.

mione's case. The *oikos* was created by the union of the members of two different households who would become husband and wife. Marriage created an implicit threat to the *oikos*, since it joins together (typically) members from two different households, with potentially conflicting claims, and the threat was greater in cases where the woman remained attached to the interests of her natal *oikos* (see Seaford 1990: 151-2). These singing heroines threaten the existence of their new *oikos* by committing acts of violence: suicide (Medea, Phaedra, Hermione) or murder (Medea with her curses). They seem opposed to the survival of the *oikos*.

Nurses in all three instances attempt to restrain the songs of their mistresses and encourage them to behave in a rational way. In these domestic plays, the Nurses are concerned with the interests of their mistresses. The Nurses try to soothe the unresponsive singing heroines. They are deeply involved in their mistresses' discomfort and would like to help them, being of solace to their suffering. Their role is similar to the role of choruses who emotionally participate in the sufferings of a character, usually appearing after the prologue in many tragic plays, as I mentioned above. They are tightly bound to the people whom they assisted while they were growing up and maturing, not to the original familial group or to the one that subsequently received them as adults. The excessive emotions, unrealistic fears and uncontrolled desires of their mistresses that are expressed through song are life-threatening. Furthermore, Medea's plans, Phaedra's irrational thoughts and Hermione's suicidal thoughts expressed by song also pose a threat to the well-being of their *oikos*. The Nurses are successful at offering consolation. Medea, Phaedra and Hermione comply and they, eventually, stop singing. The restraining of their songs, however, cannot save them or others from destruction. The heroines stop expressing their overwhelming feelings by song. They switch verbal genre and slip into dialogue; nevertheless, their problems cannot be fixed. The problems of their *oikoi* were inherited from the mythical material, versions of which may predate the *polis* (see Seaford 1990: 151-2). Medea will exact her revenge by eliminating Jason's two *oikoi* by murder and filicide, Phaedra will be exposed and will pay the price and Hermione will be driven away from her headless *oikos* and will return to her natal *oikos*. Within this context, either irrational emotions expressed by song or rational thinking expressed by speech backfire and the Nurses cannot do anything to prevent destruction.

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A Liar Tells the Truth: the Dramatic Function of the Vice in *Cambises*

Abstract

The nature of the Vice's function in Thomas Preston's *Cambises* (1560-1561) is one of the most mysterious and fascinating aspects of this early Elizabethan tragedy. In presenting a new take on the subject, this paper considers some aspects of the figure neglected in previous studies, which set this character apart from others of the same kind. These include the limits imposed by Preston to his role, resulting in the Vice being 'substituted' by the tyrant as the source of evil in the play, and the odd sincerity of the critique to *Cambises'* rule he expresses in his soliloquies, which is in tune with both literary tradition and the opinion of other positive characters. On these grounds, the paper offers an interpretation of the Vice's role as a character used by Preston to openly convey the message at the core of the play, the condemnation of the legitimate king turned tyrant: a message that, by the time the tragedy was being written, was a dangerous one to openly utter.

KEYWORDS: vice; *Cambises*; tyranny; resistance

Introduction

Between the last decade of the twentieth century and the first one of the twenty-first, Thomas Preston's tragedy *Cambises* (printed 1569, but written around 1560-1) enjoyed a new popularity among scholars of early Elizabethan drama. Starting with Eugene D. Hill's paper (1992), the tragedy has been recognised as a complex piece of theatre, the work of a high-profile intellectual dealing with important political topics and echoing the feelings of the English intellectual Protestant elite after the end of the Marian persecution. In the light of this new reputation, the work has been the subject of many studies, which have expanded the view of the tragedy as a politically engaged drama exploring the theme of tyranny and the issues connected to it in a multifaceted and thoughtful way.¹

¹ To mention the most recent examples Ward 2008, Sen 2011, Mathur 2014, Dall'Olio 2017: 491-2.

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One aspect of the tragedy to attract a great deal of attention has been Ambidexter the Vice. This is hardly a surprise, since not only is he the character with most lines in the drama,² but he is also “thematically as well as structurally . . . central to the play” (Hill 1992: 408). He is the absolute protagonist of the comic scenes where he interacts with low-life characters, but he is also able to move in the king’s court, thus tying together the two sides of the dramatic action. He plays an important part at some points in the tragedy: it is because of him that Sisamnes the judge and Smirdis, the king’s brother, fall victims to the tyrant. He also constantly steps out of the fictional world of the play to speak with the audience, commenting on what happened and boasting about his own ability at being duplicitous (or, as he calls it, ‘playing with both hands’). All these data strengthen the impression that Preston “structured his play on a running parallel between Cambises and Ambidexter” (Hill 1992: 427), a fact which did not fail to intrigue scholars, especially for what could mean for the political message underlying the tragedy.³

My object in this essay is that of offering a new interpretation of the Vice’s political function in *Cambises*, by focusing on some aspects of the role which have either gone unnoticed in previous studies, or whose importance to the understanding of the tragedy has been downplayed. In particular, in the first part of the paper, where I review what the Vice does in the play, I will show how Thomas Preston adopted a series of solutions whose result is to heavily undermine the role of Ambidexter as the ‘official’ incarnation of evil in the tragedy. This, in time, invites us to read in a new light the open critique to the tyrant’s behaviour Ambidexter expresses in his soliloquies, a critique which, as I will highlight in the second part, is expressed in such a way as to faithfully echo the literary tradition about Cambises, and is also shared by other, positive, characters inside the play: two factors which end up turning the character into a reliable voice of opposition to the tyrant. Then, in the final part of the paper, I will consider these results in relation to the political and cultural context of the play, in order to understand what moved Preston to use the Vice in such an unorthodox way.

² The Vice has 271 lines on a total of 1190 (Prologue and Epilogue excluded), and he is the only character in the play besides Cambises (who has 255 lines) to constantly appear from beginning to end.

³ After Hill, the most careful analysis of Ambidexter’s political role has been offered by Mathur 2014, which sees the Vice’s role in connection with the political theme of popular resistance to tyranny.

1. What the Vice Does (or Does Not)

As the traditional incarnation of evil, it is the Vice's role to convince either the protagonist or the antagonist of the play he is in to abandon the path of virtue in order to lead them and/or someone else to their downfall and rejoice in it. This was a traditional plot element of the genre of the interludes between the 1550s and the 1560s, from which *Cambises* reprises the character. The usual patterns saw the Vice either talking characters into following their own sinful desires or deceiving them into making an honest mistake with disastrous consequences. A clear example of the first pattern can be found in R.B.'s *Apus and Virginia* (printed 1575, but probably written before 1567; cf. Happé 1972: 273), where Haphazard the Vice persuades Judge Apus to give way to his lust for Virginia; for the second one, a good example can be seen either in Nicholas Udall's *Respublica* (1553), where Avarice the Vice, posing as Policie, deceives the titular character into entrusting him with the rule of the kingdom, or in John Pikeriung's *Horestes* (1567), where the titular character is convinced by Revenge into thinking that his action is approved by the gods, and therefore feels allowed to go on with killing his mother.⁴

Both these dramatic formulae are present in *Cambises*. In his first soliloquy, at the beginning of Scene 2, Ambidexter states his intention to "give . . . a leape to Sisamnes the judge" (2.155),⁵ the dignitary Cambises left as regent while he was leading a military expedition to Egypt. In the next Scene, Ambidexter persuades Sisamnes to abuse the power entrusted to him for his gain. This will prove to be the judge's downfall, since in Scene 4 Cambises, returned from war, when hearing of Sisamnes' misdeeds sentences him to death, a fate for which the Vice rejoices at the start of his next soliloquy in Scene 6 ("How like you Sisamnes for using of me?", he says to the audience, 6.605). Later, he persuades Smirdis, the king's brother, to retire from court and wait for his time to be king, only to denounce him immediately after to Cambises, saying that Smirdis is praying for his death because he thinks he can be a better king. In both these instances, Ambidexter's behaviour is in tune with the role he is supposed to play.

However, a great difference can be found between Ambidexter's actions in *Cambises*, and those of the other Vices. In *Apus*, *Horestes* and *Respubli-*

⁴ It is true that in *Horestes* things are more complicated, since Horestes' punishment of Clytemnestra will be ultimately considered an act of justice; however, as Robert S. Miola recently pointed out, this ending does not take away the fact that the Vice's deception is never revealed, and with no intervention of the gods to claim the ultimate justice of what the hero did, Horestes' revenge remains ultimately ambiguous (cf. Miola 2017: 159-60).

⁵ All quotes from the tragedy are from Preston 1975.

ca, what the Vice does is quite literally the starting point of the action: it is thanks to him that Apius gives in to his lust for Virginia, Horestes pursues his revenge against his mother and Respublica's kingdom falls into corruption and ruin. In all of them, the Vice's intervention disrupts the given equilibrium of the dramatic world and creates a situation that needs to be resolved. On the contrary, in *Cambises* everything Ambidexter does seems to be almost accidental to the tragedy's dramatic action; in fact, Thomas Preston writes the character in a way that makes him almost entirely innocent for the majority of the evil deeds committed in the play. This does not mean that Ambidexter is transformed into a fully positive character, since, as we saw, he still acts as his role requires; however, when seeing his actions in the larger scope of the tragedy, we cannot escape the feeling that, ultimately, Ambidexter's deeds are not the real source of the evil displayed throughout the drama, but rather episodic interventions.

Preston's tragedy can be divided into six sections, each one of them centred around one of the deeds attributed to Cambises in its source, the second book of Richard Taverner's *Garden of Wysedome* (1547):⁶ the expedition to Egypt (Scenes 1-3), the punishment of the unjust judge Sisamnes (Scene 4), the killing of the son of Praxaspes, a noble who dared to reprimand him for his drunkenness (Scene 5), the murder of Smirdis (Scenes 6-8), the incestuous marriage with a cousin of his and her subsequent death (Scenes 9-10) and finally his own death (Scene 11). Of the four central actions, three of them represent the deeds Cambises commits as a tyrant, that is as a king whose rule is aimed to satisfy his own overbearing desire for power and pleasure, instead of being for the good of his people. In two of them, Ambidexter has no part. He is absent in Scene 5, where Cambises kills Praxaspes' son, and in Scene 9, when Cambises, seeing his cousin, conceives his desire to marry her. He is present in the next Scene, where Cambises holds the wedding feast and, seeing his wife mourning Smirdis' murder, orders her to be killed; however, Ambidexter barely speaks throughout the scene, and when he does, his words express solidarity to the victim ("If that I durst, I would mourne your case", he says to her in an aside, 10.1056). We have here

⁶ Taverner's work was printed for the first time in 1539, but in that edition was comprised of only one book; the second book was added in the second printing, eight years later. I therefore refer to this second edition. The *Garden* was recognised as the main source for the tragedy by Armstrong 1950; the scholar also added that Taverner's version of Cambises' tale was inspired by the one present in Johannes Carion's *Chronica*, which Taverner probably read in Hermann Bonus' Latin translation (1537). It is worth noting that these versions present some details, such as the name of the judge and the insistence on the political relationship between the king and his nobles, which seemed to reveal some knowledge of the original Greek text, unlike the previous literary tradition.

the ultimate paradox: the Vice, the 'official' incarnation of evil, has pity for an innocent victim of the tyrant, a feeling which, since he has never spoken or acted against her (nor told the audience he wanted to), is to be intended as genuine.

As for Smirdis' death, we have seen how Ambidexter fits into it; however, the context in which he acts limits his responsibilities. When he comes on stage, before meeting the Vice, the prince laments the king's vicious habits, and Ambidexter's advice to retire from court is well received by both him and his companions, the allegorical figures of Attendance and Diligence, as a good strategy to ensure his safety, since Smirdis cannot be certain of his brother's love ("I knowe not whether he loove me, or doo me detest", 6.643). Such a beginning is a proof that the characters' environment is already compromised before Ambidexter intervenes, a fact strengthened by this episode happening immediately after the murder of Praxaspes' son, where the Vice was absent. This also gives an interesting meaning to Cambises' reaction to Ambidexter's denouncement:

KING How sayst thou? speake the trueth, was it so or no?
AMBID. I think so if it please your grace, but I cannot tel.
KING Thou plaist with bothe hands, now I perceive wel:
 But for to put all doutes aside, and to make him leese his hope:
 He shall dye by dent of Swoord, or els by choking Rope. (6.685-9)

This dialogue makes clear that Cambises is 'not' deceived by Ambidexter; on the contrary, the king is shown to understand all too well that the Vice is somehow lying. And yet, he still decides to go along with the murder, not because he believes Ambidexter, but only "to put all doutes aside", that is his own doubts about Smirdis possibly being a better king than he is: "Shall he succeed when I am gone, to have more praise than I? / Were he Father as brother mine, I sweare that he shall die" (6.690-1). The brief allusion to Cyrus the Great also contributes to clarify the personal reasons behind the tyrant's behaviour, since the previous action of the play clearly established Cambises' feeling of insecurity towards his father, a traditional figure of the ideal monarch for Elizabethan culture (cf. Grogan 2014: 40-57). In Scene 1, he motivated his expedition to Egypt to the Council as a way of being worthy of him (1.6-12); in Scene 5, the son of Praxapes was killed because the noble lord suggested that he was a lesser king than his father; now, Cambises kills his only brother because he may actually prove to be the real heir of Cyrus' greatness. The action of the tragedy maintains a clear distance between the Vice's lies and the tyrant's decision, in order to ensure that, while Ambidexter is certainly responsible for Smirdis' death, he still does not bear all the blame. Smirdis dies because of Cambises' doubts and suspicions, Ambidexter just offers him a pretext to act.

We are thus left with Sisamnes' punishment as the only portion of the tragedy where the Vice's role is completely in tune with his traditional behaviour; however, this episode also represents the only action of Cambises which previous literary tradition recognised as right. Not to wander too far from our play, suffice it to say that in *The Garden of Wyse dome*, Richard Taverner presents this story as both a cautionary tale about the administration of justice ("Thys exemple teacheth them that beare office and rule to remember, that god suffereth not iniustice nor iniury unrevenged", Taverner 1547: 2.18r) and as a proof that even a tyrant can sometimes do some good ("ther is no prince of so dysperate an hope of so naughty a life but that at the less have otherwhyles dothe some honeste acte", 2.17r-v). This reading of Sisamnes' story is maintained in Preston's tragedy, and the dramatist has the positive character of Praxaspes recognize that the king has done a deed of justice (5.478). Therefore, we may conclude that, in this instance, it is not only the Vice who fulfils his role, but the king too is acting for once as his role requires, as the keeper of justice instead of as an autocratic and wilful ruler.

When looking back at the whole play, what is clearly evinced is the dramatic strategy adopted by Preston to seriously undermine the role of the Vice as the incarnation of evil inside the play: Ambidexter bears no responsibility for two of the tyrant's deeds during the tragedy, he is only partially to blame for a third one, and the only one for which he may be deemed entirely responsible constitutes a special case within the drama itself. We may also notice that, in all instances but the last one, the Vice's action is replaced by that of the tyrant himself: Cambises decides independently to kill Praxaspes' son and the Queen and has his own reasons to kill Smirdis. It clearly emerges how Preston wanted to diminish the Vice's action, in order to have the tyrant emerge as the real source of evil in the play, in a way which, while it may seem obvious to us, it was 'not' at the time. Indeed, it would have been totally acceptable for Preston to have the Vice start the moral decadence of the tyrant by convincing him to pursue his desires, and then act as his accomplice and bad advisor, as it happens in *Apilus* and *Horestes*; but this is exactly what Preston chooses 'not' to do. And indeed, this is the one last important point we should make about Ambidexter's role in the tragedy: the moral downfall of the protagonist happens without any intervention of the Vice whatsoever.

This is a point we ought to consider, because it justifies why, in the title of the play as recorded in both its first printed edition and the *Stationers' Register*, *Cambises* is defined a tragedy (cf. Preston 1975: 45, *Stationers' Register Online* [SRO] 1122). As Gordon Braden pointed out (cf. Braden 2015: 373-4), by the time Preston wrote *Cambises*, the term did not yet define a dramatic genre identifiable by way of stylistic features. In most cas-

es, it simply indicated a tale of great, appalling events and their horrendous and bloody outcome. It often involved kings, queens, and other types of political leaders, usually represented as deranged, proud rulers who oppressed the innocent and were eventually punished (usually, but not always, by God) in a violent way.⁷ In this scenario, heavily inspired by the Medieval tradition of *de casibus*, the presence of characters whose choice of evil was not the fruit of a supernatural intervention but of their own will, was nothing new. On the contrary, it may be argued that the absence of a supernatural intervention was what made these tales 'tragic' in the first place, since rendered their protagonists fully responsible for what they did. This paradigm was even more strengthened by the rediscovery of Seneca's tragedies, whose first translations were published when *Cambises* was being written, and which deeply affected Elizabethan readership with their powerful depiction of men completely dominated by their tumultuous passions, deaf to any advice and bent on committing even atrocious crimes to satisfy their own will, without any discernible push from superhuman entities.⁸ In this context, Preston's depiction of Cambises as a man committing evil out of his own will, with little to nothing cooperation by Ambidexter, should not strike us as a surprise: it is nothing less than what *Cambises*' first audience could expect by the protagonist of a self-proclaimed tragedy, especially when known as a tyrant from the literary tradition.

However, in the *Stationers' Register*, the play is also recorded as "an enterlude", whose 'title' is "a lamentable . . . Tragedy full of pleasant mirth" (SRO 1122). Such an oxymoron, that would have made Shakespeare's Theus laugh for its apparent self-contradiction, is a signal of the mixed nature of the play, and an element that must not be forgotten when we come to interpret Preston's dramatic choices. On the one hand, the title suggests a strong connection with the dramatic genre of the interludes, whose printed editions promised in their frontispieces to be 'merry' and/or pleasant,⁹

⁷ A year before *Cambises*, the first edition of *The Mirror of Magistrates* (1559), edited by William Baldwin, defined 'tragedies' the cautionary tales contained in it, involving the crimes and following ruin of sovereigns. In that case, reference was to the content, not to the form, of these stories. Only at a later stage did a more sophisticated theory about tragedy as a literary dramatic genre start to develop, and even then, a strong connection remained with the former interpretation: cf. Braden 2015: 374-5.

⁸ I find *Cambises*' chronological proximity to the first three translations by Jasper Heywood, *Troas* (1559), *Thyestes* (1560) and *Hercules furens* (1561) particularly meaningful, especially since all three deal with the theme of the subjects' oppression by tyrannical rulers, both divine and human, and two of them present amongst their characters the figure of a cruel, overbearing tyrant (Atreus and Lycus). Cf. Woodbridge 2010: 132-4.

⁹ Just to make a few examples: *The Play of the Weather* (print. 1533) is "a . . . merry enterlude" (Happé 1972: 139), just as *Respublica* (1553, Happé 1972: 224); *King Darius*

thus establishing a definite set of expectations. And indeed, from the presence of allegorical figures to the alternation between serious and comic scenes, many are the formal elements connecting Preston's tragedy to this early literary genre. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that its readers could see no difference with the didactic works of John Heywood or Nicholas Udall, allegorical, simple stories made to educate their audience while entertaining them.¹⁰ However, by defining Cambises a 'tragedy', i.e. a gruesome story of blood and violence,¹¹ Preston also sets up another set of expectations potentially clashing with the previous ones. This makes Cambises substantially a dual play, both an interlude 'and' a tragedy: a choice which required Preston to undergo a serious rethinking and rewriting of the elements he was using.

The changes made by Preston to the Vice's role are a primary example of this. On the one hand, the Vice behaves as he always did; on the other, if the tyrant, as a cruel, oppressive sovereign, was going to be the dramatic centre of the tragedy, the Vice could no longer be the main agent of evil inside the play. Besides, he could not be shown as the corrupting agent of Cambises, as this would diminish the tyrant's own evil by turning him into yet another victim of the Vice's actions and deprive the story of its tragic quality. Thus, Preston chose to make the tyrant fully and tragically responsible for his actions, with no cooperation nor complicity of the Vice.

As a result of this choice, Preston does 'not' show how the king's decadence begins. All the spectators know about it is what the allegorical character of Shame tells them in his soliloquy, in Scene 4, and he strongly insists on the personal responsibility of the king:

All pietie and vertuose life, he [Cambises] dooth it clene refuse.
 Lechery and drunkennes, he dooth it much frequent:
 The Tigers kinde to immitate, he hath given ful consent.

(print. 1564) is "pretie . . . both pitie and pleasaunt" (*Darius* 1564: A.ir).

¹⁰ The choice of a story of classic ascendancy for a dramatic subject did not constitute a difference, since it too was an almost constant feature for the genre: *The Play of the Weather* was an adaptation of Lucian's dialogue *Icaromenippus* (cf. Happé 1972: 142), *Jack Juegler* (1553, cf. Axton 1982: 205) a partial rewriting of Plautus' *Amphitruo*, *Horestes* a staged version of the Atreides' myth (although in a version derived from Medieval romances) and *Aprius'* subject was from Livy (*Ab Urbe condita* 3.41-8).

¹¹ Even though I wouldn't rule out that from the start Preston decided to call its work a tragedy even in a literary sense, similarly to what Norton and Sackville did with *Gorboduc*. If that is so, this makes Preston's choice ground-breaking, since it gave the honourable name of 'tragedy' not to a play that, like *Gorboduc*, tried to imitate the ancient model, but to one that took a previous theatrical, popular genre and elevated it into a new form of drama, with lasting consequences for Elizabethan theatre (cf. Hill 1992: 406-7).

He nought esteemes his counsell grave, ne vertuous bringing up
But daily stil receives the drink, of damned vices cup.
He can bide no instruction, he takes so great delight:
In working of iniquitie, for to frequent his spight. (4.344-50)

The soliloquy takes place after the scene where Ambidexter persuades Sisamnes to follow his desires, and before the king returns home from his military expedition. At this point of the action, Ambidexter and Cambises have not yet met, nor has the Vice manifested any desire to move against the sovereign: the only time he mentioned him, was to say he may come and go from his court ("Now with king Cambices and by and by gone, / Thus doo I run this and that way", 2.152-3), hardly a declaration of evil intent. As we saw, the Vice will remain absent during the next couple of scenes, where Cambises will first punish Sisamnes, and then kill Praxaspes' son. The tyrant and the Vice first meet when Ambidexter denounces Smirdis, but by that time Cambises has already fallen, and Ambidexter is more interested in ruining the innocent prince than in contributing to the King's moral breakdown. We may then conclude that, despite Shame saying that Cambises "receives the drink, of damned vices cup" (4.348),¹² nothing of what Ambidexter does in the play affects the king, whose moral descent into tyranny is depicted as completely autonomous of the Vice's influence.

To conclude this first part of the discussion, I would like to introduce an interesting piece of evidence. We have already noticed that Ambidexter remains absent during Scenes 4 and 5; when he comes back on stage, in Scene 6, he starts his soliloquy by expressing the following view about Cambises: "The King him self was godly up trained: / He professed virtue, but I think it was fained. / He playes with bothe hands good deeds and il" (6.607-9). Ambidexter acknowledges that the tyrant possesses the same ability he has of "play[ing] with bothe hands", something which, in the Vice's mouth, is clearly meant to put both characters on the same moral plane. The interesting thing about this remark is that it is pronounced at a point of the action where the tyrant has already begun to replace the Vice as the main source of evil in the play. Until the end of the tragedy, all the evil deeds that take place in it will be of Cambises' doing, not of Ambidexter's, whose contribution to the dramatic action will be of very little importance. It is as if Preston, at this point, wanted to make the 'substitution' official: the role of the Vice is being taken over by the tyrant, he is now the

¹² Ward uses this line as a proof that Cambises' wickedness is of infernal origin; however, I do not think we can read that much into the text (2008: 156-7). While it is true that the imagery of Shame's soliloquy establishes a connection with the traditional description of Hell in Elizabethan literature of the time, the absence of a scene where Cambises is corrupted deprives this suggestion of every concrete, scenic correspondent.

real source of evil in the play. It was an audacious choice on Preston's part, and was accompanied by another one, which we are going to consider now.

2. What the Vice Says

The ability of talking directly to the audience is one of the traditional features of the Vice. At some point during the action, he steps out outside the dramatic world of the play and is able, for a while, to say literally whatever it pleases him to say. Other than commenting on what happened on stage (as Merry Reporte in *The Play of the Weather*), informing the audience of his schemes (as Jack Juegler at the beginning of the homonymous play), and boast of his own ability to perform evil deeds (as Haphazard in *Apius*), he could also joke with the audience (as Jack, Revenge in *Horestes* and Haphazard do), perform comic routines which involved them directly, such as reminding them of the presence of his cousin Cutpurse, and make contemporary allusions to recent events, both great and small.¹³ Theatrical convention understood that, when this happened, he spoke honestly to the audience: since he was outside the dramatic action, invisible to the play's other characters, the Vice could openly be himself and speak frankly.¹⁴

All these traditional features can be found in *Cambises*. On his first appearance, at the beginning of Scene 2, Ambidexter, clothed in mock-armour,¹⁵ jokes about his own willingness to fight inferior beings such as flies and snails, and then presents himself to the audience as a character able "with both hands finely . . . [to] play" (2.151), and willing to use his ability to bring ruin and destruction. He informs the audience of his plot against Sisamnes, performs it, and then boasts about his success. In Scene 6, he shares his evil intentions against Smirdis with the audience, warns them of the presence of his cousin Cutpurse amongst them, and at the end of the scene rejoices in the ruin of the prince; similarly, in Scene 8, he informs the audience of his intention to trick the peasants Hob and Lob into fighting each other. However, starting with Scene 6, this type of soliloquy traditional to the Vice is slowly but steadily phased out (in deliberate synchrony with the decrease of his importance in the plot), and is replaced with a stunning novelty: Ambidexter becomes an explicit opponent of the tyrant. This aspect of the character has sometimes been noticed but never fully appreciated. It has been undervalued because it comes from the mouth of a

¹³ Cf. *Jack Juegler* 993-99 and Axton 1982: 16, 202-3 on it.

¹⁴ This has made those moments also really ambiguous, since the Vice's dealings with the viewers ended up being a source of amusement and fun, potentially damaging the moral message at the end of the play: cf. Somerset 1997-1998.

¹⁵ On its symbolic meaning see Wentersdorf 1981.

character traditionally recognised as duplicitous and untrustworthy.¹⁶ It is instead my opinion that here the Vice should be taken seriously, not only because his downplayed role as the evil one dispels shadows of suspicions about his hypocrisy, but also because what Ambidexter says in the soliloquies echoes both previous literary and cultural tradition on tyranny and what other positive characters in the play say about Cambises.

This becomes apparent in his soliloquy in Scene 6 (6.610-2): “It was no good deed, Praxaspes sonne for to kil. / As he for the good deed on the Judge was commended: / For all his deeds els he is reprehended”. Soon afterward he also recognises that the king “some good deeds . . . wil doo, though they be but few” (6.615). These lines sound like a close summary of Richard Taverner’s already recalled words on Sisamnes’ punishment in *The Garden of Wysedome*: albeit a tyrant, Cambises can be just. And yet, his life can only be mentioned as an example of bad rule (“[Cambises] otherwyse as I have sayde, lyved a very tyrannouse and wicked lyfe”, Taverner 1547: 2.18r). What Ambidexter here repeats is nothing more than traditional knowledge, reformulated in a way to suggest that others too disapprove of the king’s behaviour. This is immediately shown to be true: as soon as Ambidexter’s soliloquy ends, Smirdis comes on scene, expressing his dislike of his brother’s attitude (“I like not wel of those his deeds, that he dooth stil frequent: / I wish to God that other waies, his minde he could content”, 6.624-5).

The Vice as a reliable character, expressing what appears to be a shared feeling on the tyrant’s deeds, remains constant to the end of the play, even though, at first, it does not seem to change much in the character’s behaviour. This is what happens in his next soliloquy, at the beginning of Scene 8, which can be easily divided in two distinct parts. In the first one (8.732-45), the Vice pretends to weep for Smirdis, only to laugh about the fate of the young prince: up until that point, he speaks in the traditional way. In the second part, though, Ambidexter shows a more considered view of the fact:

But hath not he [Cambises] wrought a moste wicked deed:
Because king after him he should not proceed:
His owne naturall brother and having no more:
To procure his death by violence sore?

¹⁶ The only exception is Mathur 2014, where Ambidexter’s action is connected to the theme of popular resistance inside the play. The scholar underlines how the Vice, notwithstanding his duplicity, “aids their resistance [of the popular characters] to the status quo” (51) by heightening their rebellious spirits against the tyrant, and in the end “takes such ideas [of rebellion to authority] to their logical conclusion by boasting that he had a hand in Cambises’ death” (ibid.). While I do not think that the play fully supports this interpretation, I still acknowledge Mathur to be the first to recognize the seriousness of Ambidexter’s critique of the king.

In spight because his brother should never be King:
 His hart beeing wicked consented to this thing.
 Now he hath no more Brothers nor kindred alive:
 If the King use this geer stil, he cannot long thrive. (8.745-54)

Once again, Ambidexter voices a view confirmed by other characters. That Smirdis was the only other son of Cyrus had been acknowledged by every character appearing in Scene 6, and that the reason behind his death was Cambises' envy had been made clear by the king's reaction to Ambidexter's denunciation (see above). That the murder of the Prince was unjust will be recognized immediately after this soliloquy by the peasants Hob and Lob, who will echo what Ambidexter is saying here:

Bum vay Naybor, maister king is a zhrode lad.
 Zo God help me and holidam, I think the vool be mad.
 Zome say he deale cruelly, his Brother he did kil:
 And also a goodly yung lads hart blood he did spil. (8.770-3)

And finally, the idea that Cambises cannot prosper long if he continues to behave as he does is not only an anticipation of the end of the tragedy, but is also part of the traditional Elizabethan conception of tyranny (cf. Armstrong 1946: 174-7): a traditional ending for a so-called 'tragedy' and a reminder of what the Prologue had prefigured about the shameful end of Cambises' family after his death ("But what measure the king did meat, the same did Jove commence / To bring to end with shame his race, two yeeres he did not reign", Prol. 32-3). Once again, then, Ambidexter emerges as the purveyor of a reliable, general truth, which boils down to being the moral of the tragedy.¹⁷

Now we come to the Vice's last soliloquy, following the death of the Queen and immediately preceding Cambises' own demise. Like his previous speech, this one too can be divided into two parts, the first (11.1127-38) where Ambidexter laments the death of the Queen, and the second (11.1139-52) where he expresses once again his judgment on Cambises. Unlike the previous soliloquy, though, this time Ambidexter's grief is to be understood as genuine: not only is he blameless of every action against the Queen, not only does he show compassion for her when she is to be dragged to her death, but also no drastic change of tone occurs to signal that what Ambidexter says is a pretence, as in the case of his lament for Smirdis. As a re-

¹⁷ Something which was consonant with both aspects of *Cambises* as a play with two natures. On the one hand, the expression of this moral was in line with the didactic tone traditionally associated to interludes; on the other, the tragic tradition exemplified by texts such as *The Mirror for Magistrates* also implied an ethical judgment on their characters' actions.

sult, his following statements about the tyrant can also be regarded as being genuine:

There is a sorte for feare, for the King doo pray:
That would have him dead, by the masse I dare say.
...
Cambises put a Judge to death, that was a good deed:
But to kil the yung Childe was worse to proceed.
To murder his Brother, and then his owne wife:
So help me God and holidam, it is pitie of his life.
Heare ye? I wil lay twentie thousand pound:
That the king him self dooth dye by some wound.
He hath shed so much blood that his wil be shed:
If it come so to passe, in faith then he is sped. (11.1145-52)

And indeed, these words are wholly consonant with what Ambidexter and others have been saying from Scene 6 onwards. The opinions he gives on the single actions of the king (with Sisamnes' punishment being the only justifiable one) are the same he has been repeating from that scene on, and have been echoed by other characters, while also reflecting a whole literary tradition on tyranny. The idea that Cambises will soon be punished in a way compatible with his crimes is not only a development of the idea already expressed that he could not have a long reign, but, as we saw, it is both an example of traditional thinking about tyranny, and something that has been anticipated in the Prologue of the tragedy. The idea will be taken up again at the very end of the tragedy, where one Lord will say of the tyrant, dead from a wound he got by falling from his horse: "A just rewarde for his misdeeds, the God above hath wrought: / For certainly the life he led, was to be counted nought" (11.1187-8).¹⁸

To summarize what has been observed up to this point, Preston's handling of the Vice makes him a very complex character to deal with. On the one hand, while he still acts as his role requires, his impact on the dramatic action is significantly diminished, to the point that he loses to the tyrant his traditional function of being the main incarnation of evil, thus allowing Cambises to fully display his own 'tragic' character. On the other, he gives voice several times to a critique of the tyrant himself, always aligned either with general Elizabethan thought about tyranny or with the literary tradition involving Cambises. It is also confirmed by what other characters in

¹⁸ Ward 2008: 160 thinks that Cambises' death "remains problematic ... because it subverts the traditional account of his fall", since "Preston fails to present a tragic pathos linked to the tyrant's suffering". While this is certainly true, I will argue that this is exactly Preston's intention, not his failure: the audience is not supposed to feel pathos for the tyrant.

the tragedy say and do. This double aspect makes *Ambidexter* a special case amongst the Vice figures of early Elizabethan drama, and raises the question of why Preston decided to change such a traditional character in such a drastic way. This is what now we are going to consider in the final part of this article.

3. Telling the Truth by Playing with Both Hands

When he wrote *Cambises*, in 1560-1561, Thomas Preston was twenty-three, he was soon to receive his M.A. at Cambridge University (1561), and was just at the beginning of a rather successful academic career. Four years later, he would make such an impression upon the Queen during her visit to Cambridge that she would grant him permission to kiss her hand, and bestow on him the title of *scholar[is] suu[s]* (cf. the entry on Preston in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* [DNB]; Hill 1992: 409). In point of fact, he was not at his first attempt in literary writing: he had already written a Latin poem in honour of Martin Bucer and Paul Fagius, the two Protestant academics whose bones were dug up and burnt at the stake during the Marian persecution, and then reinstated in July of 1560 during a public ceremony. In the following years, he would occasionally revert to poetry, either in Latin or in English, most of the time penning politically engaged works on contemporary political and/or religious subjects. The portrait of Preston resulting from these facts gives us the image of a devoted Protestant intellectual, and it is no surprise that criticism has long doubted his authorship of such a popular, rough-shaped work as *Cambises*. However, as Eugene D. Hill has showed, this does not constitute a serious obstacle. Not only is the tragedy a well-thought-out piece of theatre, despite its apparent awkwardness, but in 1560s the use of 'popular' literary genres as instruments to spread faith and educate people was actually recommended and encouraged in Protestant circles (cf. Hill 1992: 410-1).

In this period, Elizabeth's ascent to the throne had given the new generation of intellectuals who had grown up under Marian tyranny new hope for the future. In her first years of reign, the new Queen pursued a politics of reconciliation and tolerance, which seemed to promise a new era of collaboration between the crown and the intellectual elite. This was a relief for all the kingdom, but it held a special meaning for the Protestant community, not just because of the end of Marian persecutions, but also because the presence at court of such eminent figures as Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, alimented the hope that the Protestant ideal of a completely reformed England could finally be realized. For people like Thomas Preston and other young intellectuals such as Thomas Norton, Thomas Sackville and John Puckering, to name just a few, educated on the Humanist model of the in-

tellectual who acted as advisor to the sovereign, this also meant a chance to go to court and offer their skills to the new Queen, thus fulfilling the purpose of their education. Personal interests collided with religious and civic ideals, and around Elizabeth soon there formed a group of politically engaged, enthusiastic young politicians and intellectuals, united by a common loyalty to the Queen and a desire to act for her good and that of the country.

And yet, they would have to learn that, while Elizabeth might be more tolerant than her sister on some matters, she was not an easy person to deal with, and did not allow free discussion on certain topics. In 1559, with a royal proclamation, Elizabeth officially prohibited “Unlicensed Interludes and Plays” to deal in “Religion or Policy”, and instructed officials to ensure that “they permit none to be played wherein either matters of religion or the governance of the estate . . . shall be handled or treated” (Hughes and Larkin 1969: 115). This was no light matter, since the interludes performed in the houses of the nobility and even in court had always dealt with political matters, and were sometimes used by their authors to deliver advice and admonition to their patrons and even to the king himself.¹⁹ Neither did the queen relax the hold her predecessors had on the press, instead keeping and enforcing the traditional severity towards possible dissident opinions present within it. In this context, authors interested in discussing potentially dangerous political themes had to be very careful in what they said in order to avoid censorship, usually doing so either by constantly modifying their works or by using such literary means as prologues and epilogues as spaces where they could reassure their audience that they did not contain contemporary allusions.²⁰

This was especially true when literary works dealt with one specific subject: tyranny, or, to be more specific, what makes a tyrant and how people should react to his rule. During the Marian persecution, an abundant resistance literature flourished amongst Protestant exiles. According to writers as John Ponet, Christopher Goodman and John Knox, a tyrant was a ruler who acted against the law of God and abused his power for his own benefit, and the people had the right not only to disobey his or-

¹⁹ Cf. Walker 1998 on this subject.

²⁰ Two notable examples of this are *The Mirror of Magistrates* and *Damon and Pythias*, the famous comedy of Richard Edwards (printed 1575, but staged in 1564-1565: cf. King 2001: 32-5). The first one, after being suppressed in its first edition under Mary (1554), underwent a notable series of changes in all following re-printings to satisfy readers and to be aligned with the official view of the kingdom (cf. Winston 2004: 399); the second one opens with a prologue announcing that no contemporary allusion should be recognised in the play: “We talk of Dionysius’ court, we mean no court but that” (*Damon*, Prol. 40; cf. Hill 1992: 425).

ders, but also to depose and even kill him. They supported this theory with examples taken both from the Bible and from Latin literature.²¹ This theory was initially thought to be in contrast with Marian rule, but did not disappear with Elizabeth's ascent; on the contrary, it provided, in 1567, the theoretical ground on which the Scottish nobility justified its uprising against and deposition of Mary Stuart. Elizabeth could not tolerate this view, even more so because it was not just her sister and predecessor Mary who was criticized: some of the Protestant exiles did not spare her own father, Henry VIII, from blame, accusing him of having used the Reformation for his purposes.²² So, during her reign, Elizabeth attended to the development of a new view of the subject, whose full exposition can be found in the *Homilie against disobedience and wylful rebellion* (1571). In this text, the tyrant is identified with the usurper of the throne, against whom people could (and indeed should) rebel; on the contrary, people were not allowed to rebel against a legitimate king, even if he acted in a way unfitting to his rule. All they could do was to pray either for the king to convert to good or for God to remove him.

The relationship between this political and cultural context and *Cambises* has long been recognised and discussed; in fact, it has undergone a slight but significant critical revision over time. William A. Armstrong, the first one to consider it, saw Preston's tragedy as a work upholding this official ideology. Years later, Eugene D. Hill pointed out that it instead presented a more general depiction of tyranny and its evils, especially turn-coating, and also included an indirect but clear criticism of both Mary Tudor and Henry VIII, and advice to the young Elizabeth not to follow in their footsteps (cf. Armstrong 1955 and Hill 1992). More recently, Allyna Ward and Maya Mathur have explored how the tragedy stages various forms of resistance to political power and discusses about their justice (cf. Ward 2008 and Mathur 2014). They have also highlighted how Preston was dealing with topics that were both fairly complex and terribly dangerous: a word spoken out of place could alert censorship, and that would bring about perilous consequences which the young, ambitious intellectual wished to avoid. At the same time, though, Preston wanted his work to express a very clear political message about tyranny, one that the young Protestant intellectual, who had seen Marian tyranny first-hand, desired to voice at all costs. He sought to show the evils of tyranny and condemn the person that

²¹ For an effective review of resistance literature in the 1550s, cf. Woodbridge 2010: 138-49. It is also worth noting that the ideas of resistance literature were the same ones present in Medieval philosophic tradition about the tyrant: cf. Parsons 1942.

²² Cf. Hill 1992: 426-7, where the scholar reports the case of Anthony Gilby, another Marian exile.

was at the heart of it, the king who thought to use his power for his personal gain, broke the law of God and refused the advice of his peers. He probably also intended to warn the new Queen not to follow the same pattern as her predecessors, but to remain faithful to the true nature of kingly power.²³

In my opinion, this is the key to understanding Ambidexter's role, and also why Preston crafted him in a way that was highly unusual for a Vice. He could have had him simply act as a bad advisor and an accomplice to the tyrant; instead, he chose to diminish the impact of his action on the plot, so that the tyrant could emerge as the real disruptor of the social order and its norms. It is not by chance that the only moment the Vice is completely responsible for something evil occurs when he persuades Si-samnes towards his ruin: this, as we saw, is also the only moment in the tragedy when the king acts as he should. In the rest of the play, after the king abandons the path of virtue and turns to tyranny, the Vice is reduced to a figure resembling a parasite or a clown rather than the master of all evil. The king's choice to misuse his position makes him a far more dangerous character for the social order: while Ambidexter's performance of evil deeds constitutes an example of conventionally accepted behaviour (at least from a theatrical point of view), the king, by abandoning his traditional function, jeopardizes the entire society as well as the traditional structures of the dramatic genre of the interlude.

The diminishment of Ambidexter's role as a Vice is accompanied by another startling move on Preston's part: his choice of having him express the moral condemnation of the tyrant, which collides not only with the literary tradition about Cambises and the Elizabethan views on tyranny, but also with the opinions of other, more positive, characters like Smirdis, Hob and Lob, Attendance and Diligence. This is extremely important, because is in stark, and deliberate, contrast with the rest of the tragedy, where denial of freedom of speech is presented as the main consequence of tyranny. Praxaspes' son is killed because his father dared to reprehend the king, the Queen dies because she dares to lament Smirdis' death, Smirdis chooses to remain silent and retire from the court because he knows that it is not safe to be around his brother. In fact, none of them has the chance to speak against the tyrant, all the more so because Cambises, though abusive and oppressive, is still the legitimate king. To accuse him of tyranny means committing high treason, as is proved in Scene 8, where Ambidexter threat-

²³ Bevington (1968: 158) thought it likely that *Cambises* was written for a representation before the Queen, under Leicester's patronage. While no documentary evidence survives, I agree with Hill (1992: 405) that this is not unlikely, given that Dudley did something very similar with Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* (cf. Walker 1998: 197-220).

ens to expose Hob and Lob as traitors for their criticism of the king.²⁴ However, the Vice has the possibility to speak outside the dramatic world, in a space where he enjoys absolute freedom, as in the tradition of the interludes: Preston uses this convention to let him deliver what otherwise could not be said, the open and clear condemnation of the king turned tyrant as “the moste evil disposed person that ever was” (6.613).

As final evidence of this, let us consider that Ambidexter is one of the only two characters in the tragedy to openly call Cambises a tyrant, the other one being Smirdis in a vain attempt to convince Crueltie and Murder not to kill him (“Consider the king is a tirant tyrannious: / And all his dooings be damnable and parnitious”, 7.724-5). In this instance, Smirdis uses the word ‘tyrant’ to delegitimize the orders of his brother and save his life: if he is a tyrant, then his power is not legitimate, and he should not be obeyed. However, this way of thinking, as Allyna Ward pointed out (2008: 159-60), was very similar to that of the resistance writers, especially since the word is referred to a king whose title is legitimate. By calling his brother a tyrant, the prince is unwittingly committing high treason. As for Ambidexter, he calls Cambises a tyrant twice during his soliloquies, first in Scene 6 (“this tirant Cambices”, 6.615) and then in Scene 11, this time in coincidence with the only allusion to contemporary events in the tragedy:

What a King was he that used such tyranny?
 He was a kin to Bishop Bonner, I think verely,
 For bothe their delights was to shed blood:
 But never intended to doo any good. (11.1141-4)

When the Vice pronounces these words, he is still in his personal space outside the dramatic world, when theatrical convention allows him to speak freely. Preston takes advantage of this space and uses it to say what otherwise would simply be unspeakable: that the king who abuses his position and rules for his own gain is, indeed, a tyrant, even if his title is legitimate. It was a bold thing to say on a public stage (especially given the unmistakable parallel with recent English history created by mentioning Bonner),²⁵ but that is also the reason why Preston had the Vice say it: in his

²⁴ Like Mathur (2014: 50-1), I do not see any contradiction between Ambidexter’s threat to Hob and Lob and his condemnation of the King. It is not clear whether Ambidexter really means to denounce the two peasants (on the contrary, he seems to suggest to the audience that he is just joking), and in any case his behaviour would still be perceived as conventional.

²⁵ Edmund Bonner (d. 1569), Bishop of London under Mary’s reign (1553-1559), was one of the most infamous upholders of Marian persecutions. His numerous trials of ‘heretics’ made him a particularly hated figure amongst Protestant resistance literature, granting him the nickname of ‘bloody Bonner’. After Elizabeth’s ascent to the throne,

mouth, to inattentive ears, the word would simply have been that of a traditional character, performing his usual routine on stage. Only an attentive eye, stopping to consider the dramatic action as a whole, in its mixture of 'old' elements from the interlude genre, and a 'new', tragic subject, and to reflect on its meaning, would have been able to perceive the author's real game: the way Preston played with both hands just like his character to convey a very disrupting message while seemingly respecting the rules of theatrical genres.

Conclusion

"The trick was to make's one point indirectly, obliquely, one might say, ambidextrously – in such a way that nobody could pin the dangerous argument down if the author wished to evade responsibility": this is how Eugene D. Hill explained Preston's incorporation of dangerous messages in his play without suffering any consequences (1992: 425).²⁶ This paper has shown how Preston's treatment of *Ambidexter* follows this strategy, describing the way the young intellectual and playwright subverted the theatrical conventions around the Vice in order to convey indirect critique of tyranny. Preston undermines the actual impact of *Ambidexter's* deeds on the dramatic action, thus making the tyrant the real source of evil instead of the Vice. He also revised the Vice's traditional address to the audience by having him express a strong condemnation of the titular character, thus turning him into the accuser of the tyrant, who, albeit a legitimate king, rules for his own gain. This was not an easy message in 1560s England, where it risked being seen as an act of high treason. By allowing the Vice to communicate this message camouflaged as the unreliable state-

he was forced to resign his seat, and spent the last ten years of his life in prison. Cf. the entry on Bonner in *Oxford DNB*. The Bonner mention recalled above had been often used by scholars as a confirmation of the playwright's political involvement. For Armstrong (1955: 291-2), it confirmed the close link between the tragedy and the two anti-Catholic ballads ascribed to Preston, thus suggesting not only that it was the same person, but that he also was "a polemical writer" (292). Hill 1992: 417 saw the reference as a way for Preston to make clear the parallel between the Persian kingdom oppressed by Cambises and the recently-ended Marian tyranny: "the allusion . . . makes the connection for anybody who might have missed it." Mathur also supports this view: "By aligning Bonner with Cambises, Preston draws attention to the violence perpetrated under Mary and suggests that those seeking contemporary examples of tyranny did not have far to look" (2014: 41).

²⁶ Specifically, Hill was talking about the fact that Preston was inviting his audience to recognize the figure of Henry VIII in Cambises. However, the idea can be easily widened to embrace other aspects of the tragedy.

ment of an unreliable character, Preston intended to reach a compromise that would allow him to utter that message freely while, at the same time, avoiding censorship. On a superficial level, the Vice was to talk and act as usual, but to attentive eyes, his behaviour and speech would appear much more meaningful and dangerous. After all, one of Ambidexter's tasks, Eugene Hill suggested, was that of alerting the attention of the spectator so he/she might perceive the deep implications of the dramatic action, since "we are the ones whose purses (and lives) are threatened" (Hill 1992: 432).

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***King Lear*: Everything Comes of Nothing and the Great Stage of Fools¹**

Abstract

The tragedy of *King Lear* has a unique relationship to ‘nothing’. The word is used more frequently in this play than any other in the canon. ‘Nothing’ as a condition of humanity and the universe itself is the driving concern of *King Lear*, and indeed has a presence in almost all of Shakespeare’s ontological discourses into the nature of the human. But Shakespeare’s ‘nothing’ in *Lear* is never powerless: it is never nihilistic or negative space. In fact, nothing gives birth to everything. Lear must painfully learn through the stripping of self and the re-evaluation of language, that his maxim “nothing will come of nothing” (1.1.99) reveals that the “nothing” that transpires are the subsequent actions and thoughts in the play. Coming to terms with our nothingness is entangled for Shakespeare in our comprehension of human connection and of alleviating human suffering by sharing it. This paper examines the value of ‘nothing’ in *Lear* and in Shakespeare’s concept of the world being a great stage, where humans navigate between being sublime, but also fumbling, fools.

KEYWORDS: Nothing; Lear; Fool; zero; naught; nought; Cordelia; primogeniture; Christian; Pagan; nihilism; stage; tragedy; arithmetic; love

The tragedy of *King Lear* has a unique relationship to ‘nothing’. A complex relationship, one that evokes pagan and Christian readings of the emptying of self for spiritual revelation, and simultaneously encompasses the hollowness of ‘seeming’ virtues and concealed hard hearts. The presence of “nothing” and its cognates in Shakespeare’s great tragedy has long been noted and commented upon (Bigliuzzi 2019; Burzyńska 2018; Chiba 2018; Sheerin 2013; White 2013; Levin 2009; Bigliuzzi 2005; Rotman 1993; Fisher 1990; Fleissner 1962). The word is used more frequently in this play than any other in the canon.² If we examine it in the context of a distinctive pattern of imagery – the figure nought and numerous images of its shape in referenc-

¹ This article, which began as a joint paper, is indebted to many intensive discussions with David Schalkwyk and could not have been written without them.

² It occurs twenty-nine times. See <http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/> (Accessed 14 July 2019).

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es to planets, the sun, orbs, eclipses, eyes, crowns, eggs, conception, birth, death, female “organs of increase”, the word “love” “poor” “fool” and the play’s multiple instances of the exclamation, “O” – it quickly becomes apparent that “nothing” as a condition of humanity and the universe itself is the driving concern of *King Lear*. But the nothing is never powerless: it is never nihilistic or negative space. In fact, nothing – with its early modern connotations of female genitalia³ – gives birth to everything. And Lear, because of his “blindness to ‘nothing’” (Levin 2009: 158), must painfully learn through the stripping of self and the re-evaluation of language, that his maxim “nothing will come of nothing” (1.1.99)⁴ reveals that the “nothing” that transpires are the subsequent actions and thoughts in the play. *Ex nihilo fit ens creatum*. This creation from nothing is not an image of salvation – the nothing or ‘chaos’ of the creation myth from which the universe is constructed – is not simply the revelatory birth of truth and beauty, but also despair and madness. The abyss is one pregnant with possibility – the domain of both the fiend and the god. And human potential. The critical thing is not whether we are ‘nothing’, but what being ‘nothing’ actually means.

In recent years critics have augmented discussion of the significance of the word ‘nothing’ with accounts of the game-changing but also very late introduction of the figure nought (or cipher) into the English arithmetical system from the East. Some have argued that the resistance to the new, paradoxical nought was religious, stemming both from its signification of the empty chaos from which God created the world *ab nihilo*, and a more racial antipathy to its supposed Arabic origins (Fleissner 1962). But this paradoxical cipher enabled double-entry bookkeeping, and so contributed in practical ways to the efficient extension of trade and commerce, and the growth of capitalism. Nought as a signifier of exponential expansion.

The crucial thing to note about nought is that it has none of the characteristics of the integers with which it keeps company: unlike them, it is neither “positive nor negative, even nor odd, prime nor non-prime, fractional or whole” (White 2013: 234). But this figure of ‘nothing’ acts as a very powerful ‘value’ in the system of integers. In England, as early as 1400,

³ Although Cordelia’s “nothing” is not overtly sexual, it is a word loaded with other meanings and fertile potential. ‘Nothing’ in Shakespeare commonly carries resonances of its well-known double entendre – see Martin Wiggins: “*Much Ado about Nothing* . . . is one of Shakespeare’s smuttiest double entendres. If the story is about anything at all, it is much ado about vaginas, also signified by the word ‘nothing’” (2000: 73). And Edward Taylor: “Signifying what lies between a maid’s legs, as when Hamlet brutally jokes to Ophelia of ‘country matters’, the word ‘nothing’ points to sex” (1990: 31-2).

⁴ All quotations are from William Shakespeare, ‘Folger Digital Texts’, <http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org>.

Thomas Usk recognised: “Although a sipher in augrim [algorithm or algorism, the Hindu-Arabic numerals] have no might in signification of it selve, yet he yeveth power in signification to other” (qtd in White 2013: 235). Depending on where it is placed in relation to an integer, nought alters the initial signifier. Thus the ‘new’ zero was generally held to be paradoxical: “How is it that ‘o’ can indifferently stand, depending on context, for the number one hundred (‘C’), as a support for the number ten (‘X’), and as a support for nothing at all (‘?’). A question which *King Lear* poses with considerable urgency” (Davis 2019: 123). Lear’s one hundred knights that are reduced to 1, causing his heart to break into a hundred thousand flaws, is a numerical re-evaluation that results from the shifting figure nought (Fisher 1990). This is the contextual power of nought as a value within a system. Nought remains nothing only without its accompanying integer. In Shakespeare’s play the value of nought is similarly perspectival and contextual. The Fool in Lear remarks, “thou art an O without a figure, I am better than thou art now, I am a fool, thou art nothing” (1.4.197–9).

In *Signifying Nothing: The Semiotics of Zero*, Brian Rotman uses the mathematical properties of zero to read *King Lear* as an exercise in nihilism. *King Lear*

dramatise[s] reductions to nothing, charting the annihilation of human warmth, the dissolution of social, natural, familial bonds, the emptying of kindness, sympathy, tenderness, love, pity, affection into hollow shells, into substitutes for themselves which take part in the deal, the transaction, the exchange . . . The play shows the destruction of a world and a self by a force derived from “nothing”; a force wearing the mask . . . of zero. (1993: 78–80)

But is this true? The force wearing the mask of zero may not be a force driving towards nihilism or destruction, but rather to exposure, revelation, infinite potential and creation. According to quantum field theory there is no such thing as a vacuum – “empty space is actually fizzing with short-lived stuff . . . ‘NOTHING will come of nothing’, *King Lear* admonishes Cordelia in the eponymous Shakespeare play. In the quantum world, it’s different: there, something comes of nothing and moves the furniture around” (Brooks 2016). Nought does not necessarily signify naught.

The most famous instance of “nothing” in the play occurs in the first scene:

LEAR . . . what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters’? Speak.
CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
LEAR Nothing?
CORDELIA Nothing.

LEAR Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again.
(1.1.94-9)

Lear's response is usually read as the classical principle, a general aphorism, the Latin saw, *nihil ex nihilo* fit, contrary to "The theological doctrine that God's Word created all that exists *ex nihilo*" (Fisher 1990: 93). But Lear's statement is also a particular response to a specific word: a warning for Cordelia to mend her speech a little lest she mar her fortune. Nothing will come of Cordelia 'saying' nothing. But what is Cordelia's "nothing"? Saying "nothing" is a contrary act to staying silent.

Jonathan Bate asserts that Cordelia refuses to play the court game (Bate 2008). This is not a game. But if it were a game, Cordelia is not refusing to play: she makes an unexpected manoeuvre.⁵ The setup of the inheritance is discomfiting to all. None know how to 'play', as the first two daughters stumble through their rhetoric. Lear has made the first unexpected manoeuvre. The natural order would be for primogeniture: the passing of the whole kingdom to the first-born. The play begins with a prologue, before the fateful court scene, that alerts us to an interference with this traditional norm. Kent and Gloucester, the two senior peers in the Kingdom, are puzzled that Albany, husband of the first-born Goneril, seems to have fallen out of the direct line of inheritance:

KENT I thought the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.
GLOUCESTER It did always seem so to us, but now in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most, for [equalities]⁶ are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety.
(1.1.1-7)

This theme of primogeniture is continued in the subsequent discussion about Edgar and Edmund, as first and second born.

Thus, the initial moments of the play give a framework with which to interpret the division of the kingdom.

When Lear enters, his first line signals his pressing concern, his motivation for innovating away from traditional practice: "Attend the lords of France and Burgundy" (1.1.34). Lear is preparing to bequeath Cordelia her dowry – a proportion of the Kingdom. And he has carefully construct-

⁵ For different critical perspectives on the 'game' see Katarzyna Burzyńska: "Both Cordelia's and Lear's 'nothings' are fraught with meanings" (2018: 366).

⁶ The Folger edition inserts 'equalities' in brackets to indicate the alternative "qualities" reading in F. Here "equalities" has the obvious meaning that they are equally weighed.

ed a way to give his youngest daughter the most opulent third: “That we our largest bounty may extend / Where nature doth with merit challenge” (1.1.57-8). Merit will challenge nature. The richest inheritance will not follow the natural order of first born but go to the one with most merit. And what test has he invented to evaluate this merit? “Which of you shall we say doth love us most?” (1.1.56).

If it is a game, Lear has rigged the results. He has loaded the dice. Everyone knows that the one with most “merit” to solve this riddle is Cordelia. This is not a capricious, wayward, narcissistic, or senile manoeuvre, however disastrously it may turn out. It is a careful plan, where Lear’s love supersedes his political responsibility.⁷ Its unexpected backfiring inflames his reaction disproportionately.

E.H. Gombrich alerts us to the fundamental truth of human perception – that we see what we expect to see or want to see (1977). In this case Lear does not hear what he expects or wants to hear. But this creates a similar effect. He consequently projects unto Cordelia’s “nothing” what is not there. That is to say, an absence.

But what is the question asked of Cordelia when she responds with that fateful word “nothing”? “. . . what can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters”? (1.1.94-5). What can Cordelia say to draw the most opulent third of wealth and power? Nothing. The question is not a direct question about her love for Lear in itself. It asks her to wield her love into an instrument of transactional value. For Cordelia love cannot be ‘coined’ for land. This is counterfeiting value. ‘Love’ in tennis comes from ‘l’oeuf’ – nothing, nought, the egg. Cordelia introduces “nothing” as an expression of love. It is not empty space, not naught. Kent tries to help Lear understand this, to “see better”: “Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least, / Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sounds / Reverb no hollowness” (1.1.171-3).

We are oriented through Cordelia’s asides to interpret her language with a particular gloss.

CORDELIA What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent.

. . .

Then poor Cordelia!

And yet not so, since I am sure my love’s

More ponderous than my tongue.

(1.1.68, 85-7)

⁷ Discussing sixteenth- and seventeenth-century notions of sovereignty and Lear, Brain Sheerin notes: “The reciprocity that Lear not only respects but demands – both in the form of tributes of love and of a continuing respect for his “name and all th’addition to a king” (1.1.34) – is perfectly consistent with typical monarchical (and absolutist) discourse of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.” (2013: 802).

Cordelia's love is ponderous. It is a great 'O' with substance and weight. The breath that carries words is light and insubstantial: in one sense, 'nothing'. She cannot heave the weight of her heart into the empty orifice of the mouth.

This is a reoccurring theme in Shakespeare's plays:

ANTONY . . . there is beggary in the love that can be reckoned.
(*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.1.16)

BEATRICE Speak, count, 'tis your cue.

CLAUDIO Silence is the perfectest herald of joy. I were but little happy if I
could say how much.
(*Much Ado About Nothing*, 2.1.299-301)

BASSANIO Madam, you have bereft me of all words.
Only my blood speaks to you in my veins,
And there is such confusion in my powers
As after some oration fairly spoke
By a belovèd prince there doth appear
Among the buzzing pleasèd multitude,
Where every something being blent together
Turns to a wild of nothing, save of joy
Expressed and not expressed.
(*The Merchant of Venice*, 3.2.179-87)

For Cordelia, "nothing" is an expression of her truth. It is not a scanting or a refusal or a negation. A.C. Bradley writes: "And even if truth were the one and only obligation, to tell much less than truth is not to tell it. And Cordelia's speech not only tells much less than truth about her love, it actually perverts the truth when it implies that to give love to a husband is to take it from a father" (1951: 321). But Cordelia's comments on her sisters' love, to which Bradley objects so strongly, are not an expression of her own attitude to love. Being "nothing", her love is indivisible. But by adopting her sisters' calculating language of love, she points out its logic: if love is something that can be calculated, quantified, distributed, then her sisters do indeed forget the love they owe their husbands. And most importantly, Cordelia is alerting her father to the fulsome emptiness of her sisters' "all". This contrasts with the fullness of Cordelia's "nothing", and, pace Bradley, the fullness of her truth – "the simple truth of Cordelia's 'nothing'" and "her incapacity to ruse and cog" (Levin 2009: 155, 158). "Poor" Cordelia can 'only' speak what she purposes to do. It is not that she will not, but that she cannot, her richness signified by what she lacks: "But even for want of that for which I am richer: / A still-soliciting eye and such a tongue / That I am glad I have not" (1.1.265-7).

Catherine Belsey reminds us that Shakespeare's play, based on Geoffrey De Monmouth's story of *King Lear* and his daughters, has its origins in an older, widely circulated folk tale, "Love like Salt",⁸ "in which an old rich father asks his three daughters which one loves him most . . . The first says, 'More than life itself' (rewarded with some land and a rich husband), the second affirms, 'More than all the world'" (rewarded with some land and a rich husband), and the youngest replies, "I love you as fresh meat loves salt". The old man is furious, misevaluating and misunderstanding the response. The daughter is banished, serves in disguise as a scullion next door, the rich master (of course) falls in love with her, and all are invited to the wedding feast. But the mysterious bride orders the kitchen to use no salt in their preparation – salt is the medieval way to keep meat from spoiling. The food is inedible. The old man realises the value of his daughter's expression of love. Her true identity is revealed and they are reunited (Belsey 2008).

Cordelia's "nothing" is like the salt. Like the father in the folk tale, Lear misevaluates the word "nothing"; it is not that "nothing" has no value. For Cordelia the 'nought' is a signifier of truth: "So young, my lord, and true" (1.1.119). Lear bequeaths this truth back to her in purely negative terms. "Thy truth, then, be thy dower" (120). He waywardly amplifies and multiplies the perceived defects of "nothing", adding countless noughts as "truth" becomes the signifier of "pride", "untender", "little seeming substance", "a stranger to [his] heart", a "sometime daughter", a fallen price, "unfriended", "new-adopted to hate", "dowered with [his] curse, strangered with [his] oath", "a wretch whom Nature is ashamed / Almost t' acknowledge hers" (1.1.118-244). She is cast aside with this "nothing" – without his grace, his love, his benison. He propagates the nothing like counterfeiting coins. Cutting what he thinks is her emptiness into signifiers of zeros. Later this haunts him in madness: "No they cannot touch me for coining. I am the King himself" (4.6.102-3).⁹

Gombrich's discussion of perception includes a further phenomenon, after Wittgenstein, of a perspectival switch, where the same figure may be seen as two different aspects, as in Jastrow's duck-rabbit (Wittgenstein 2009: 204e). France responds to the same "nothing" as everything: "Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich being poor; / Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised." (1.1.290-1).

In the stocks Kent encapsulates the perspectival conundrum of nothing: "Nothing almost sees miracles / But misery" (2.2.180-1). The completed sen-

⁸ For variants of the folk tale see <https://www.pitt.edu/~dash/salt.html> (Accessed 14 July 2019).

⁹ The Folger text uses "coining" from Q1.

For Lear the hidden things in the world are “close-pent up guilts” that must “rive their concealing continents” and “cry / These dreadful summoners grace” (3.2.60-3). In the storm Lear desires the great gods to expose enemies; the blame, the corruption, the perjured, the caitiff, the lustful, the bloody hand, the wretch with undivulged crimes are all projected onto others. Initially Lear maintains that he is the suffering victim of deception and injustice. He is a man “more sinned against than sinning” (64). He conjures the elements to reduce the world to nothing – “Strike flat the thick rotundity of the world” (3.2.9): to destroy all the seeds of life that make ingrateful man – those other ingrateful men (or women) of course – not him.

But Lear begins to feel compassion. He shares something kinaesthetically with the fool. Coldness of the flesh: “Art cold? / I am cold myself” (3.3.74-5). This great King, with the one part of his heart that feels pity, gestures to the Fool to enter the vile hovel become precious through necessity. To enter before him: “In boy, go first” (3.4.30). In a prayer to the “Poor naked wretches” – the nothing and the dispossessed, Lear rives himself open. Rendering himself naked. Recognising his responsibility with an “O”: “O I have ta'en / Too little care of this” (36-7). This is the moment where he commands pomp to take physic and exposes himself to feel what wretches feel. To feel need not reason. To shake the superflux to others so the heavens appear more just. Understanding that it is only through human action that justness is revealed.

Lear moves from a sense that it is ridiculous or invalid to ask about need to an insight into his complicity in the unequal distribution of needs, to the idea of his own “superflux” (3.4.40), which needs to be shaken to those in greater need. The superflux no longer gives life value. Lear begins to glimpse in contrast to what Agamben calls “bare life” (1998), that the value of life is “unaccommodated man” (3.4.113). And it is this state of humanity that he joins. Unbuttoning his button and unbuttoning his mind and heart. If Edgar is forced by the injustice of Lear’s world to reduce himself to ‘nothing’, Lear actively chooses to repudiate that world by joining poor Tom. And reducing himself to “everything”.

LEAR Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but
 such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lend-
 ings! Come, unbutton here.
 (3.4.113-6)

Although Lear passes through a process in which he can begin to make use of nothing, it is not a linear or teleological process. It is a wrestling, a resistance, an epiphany, a backward glance, a stare of amazement, a desire for revenge, a surrender to fondness, a fear of madness, and ultimately a desire for physic: “Let me have surgeons, I am cut to the brains” (4.6.212).

ter that Edmund told him was “nothing”: “The quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let’s see. Come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles” (1.2.37). Gloucester does not need to see to see nothing. But now that he has no physical sight he needs to re-evaluate “nothing” with his mind. “Mark but the penning of it” (4.6.154), Lear antagonises. Gloucester had mistaken the penning of Edgar’s hand. “Were all thy letters suns, I could not see” (155). The image of the round sun would make all the letters blinding zeros. Gloucester’s response also heartbreakingly sounds the double meaning of sons— his initial metaphorical blindness regarding Edgar and his subsequent literal blindness caused by Edmund. Kent instructs Lear to see better. Lear instructs Gloucester to see with no eyes.

The shifting evaluation and the causality of “nothing” in the play, is analogous to shifting the zero in the numerical system.

Gloucester moves from an image of the heavens as capricious and cruel – “As flies to wanton boys are we to th’ gods; / They kill us for their sport” (4.1.41-2) – to one of comfort and reprieve: “You ever-gentle gods, take my breath from me; / Let not my worser spirit tempt me again / To die before you please” (4.6.241-3).

The capriciousness and cruelty he suffered at the hands of humans, and the comfort and reprieve as well. As with Lear’s shaking of the superflux – it is only human action that can show the heavens more just. Gloucester repeats this, “distribution should undo excess / And each man have enough” (4.2.80-1). We probably live in a world where Lear’s critique of the abuse of power and undistributed accumulation of wealth is more pertinent than at any other time.

This brings us to another aspect of “nothing” in *King Lear*. Namely the reading of the play as a whole, offering a nihilist universe.

For James Calderwood, “‘nothing’ is a kind of vortex that draws the ordered world of *King Lear* downwards . . . The consolations of Christian theology are temptingly offered but cruelly withdrawn” (1986: 6-9). For David Levin, it is “nothingness” that defines the world of Lear, “a limitless, paradoxical, negative dimension . . . threatened by evil’s movement towards nothingness, and governed by a blind and destructive nature” (2009: 147-154). Katherine Duncan-Jones decrees when Albany calls to the gods to defend Cordelia we are answered visibly on stage – Cordelia’s dead body dangling from Lear’s arms. According to Jones this presages a godless world. Or a Pagan world of unjust and ungoverned fate (Duncan-Jones 2008). But Lear’s world is not defined by “nothingness”, a word that did not exist in Shakespeare’s time (see Levin 2009: 142). Shakespeare offers an entirely radical and contemporary view. It is not gods that have forsaken humans. It is humans that have forsaken humans. Edmund and Goneril gave the order for Lear and Cordelia’s death, and it is Albany and the others that

have forgotten them: "Great thing of us forgot!" (5.3.282). Human beings can forget. It is not only human cruelty but also human frailty that creates suffering. Lear's world is not a world where gods render humans defenceless. It is a world that needs human responsibility and action.

Readings of the ending as nihilist tend to focus on the death of Cordelia, the repetition of "never", and the gods' injustice – "Is this the promised end?" (5.3.316). Even if Lear dies in ecstasy believing Cordelia alive, the universe appears desolate, the question of redemption centred on a single character – Lear. The mode of reading tragedy focusing on the ending ignores the play as a process which takes the audience through experiences and thoughts that cannot be reduced to the experiences and thoughts of the characters in their final moments. Lear offers his eyes to Gloucester – "If thou wilt weep my fortunes, take my eyes" (4.6.194). We can share and understand suffering if we look through the eyes of others. And the audience are able to look at the events of the play through the eyes of all the characters. Thus, the experience of empathy, the transformation of knowledge, the chance of redemption, happen for the audience irrespective of the fates of individual characters. Recall that for Rotman the mask of zero propels "reductions to nothing . . . the annihilation of human warmth, the dissolution of social, natural, familial bonds, the emptying of kindness, sympathy, tenderness, love, pity, affection into hollow shells" (1987: 78). But what is revealed to the audience is not just terror, cruelty and suffering, but countless small acts of human kindness, warmth, love, support and compassion which cannot be annihilated or reduced to nothing by the tragic end of the play.

The acts of kindness are magnified in a tragedy as major signifiers of humanity, amplified by the cruelty and darkness of their surrounding context. The humans in this world face the choice of whether to close their fists or open their hands. Michael Neill has written a compelling and moving discussion on the offering and the extension of hands in Lear, the unadorned friendly hand, desanctified, dispossessed of magic, that smells of mortality: the human hand that can give benediction (2002: 202-3). Lear is also a world of compassion filled with selfless acts. Cornwall's servant self-sacrificing resistance to his master's cruelty, the old man's ancient love to Gloucester, Kent's loyalty to Lear even to the death, Albany ready to give up power, Edgar expressing his anguish at the suffering of others throughout, Cordelia's despair for her father not for herself: "For thee, oppressed king, I am cast down / Myself could else outfrown false Fortune's frown" (5.3.6).

In Lear's final moments, in poetic reprise of his undoing his button in the storm, he asks: "Pray you undo this button" (5.3.373). Somebody reaches out and helps him in this simple gesture of human connection. And he feels

grateful: "Thank you sir" (374). We are not left with nihilation. The universe is not governed by unjust gods. The tragedy is a tragedy of human condition. What makes it a tragedy is that the self-destruction is not inevitable.

Coming to terms with our nothingness is entangled for Shakespeare in our comprehension of human connection and of alleviating human suffering by sharing it. In *Richard II* the deposed King in prison comprehends that we must come to terms with our nothingness, together: "Nor I, nor any man that but man is / With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased / With being nothing" (*Richard II*, 5.5.39-41). It is the transformation of our mortality to something precious.

In the final moments of *Lear* the death of Cordelia is a prolonged valuation and re-evaluation of the breath of life. Nothing cannot be divided. Whether she has breath or not is not limited to the final moment of her death. Is she dead as earth or light as the feather that stirs? Lear calls them "men of stones" (5.3.308). Then asks for a mirror which he calls a stone. "If that her breath will mist or stain the stone / Why then she lives" (5.3.314-5). Stone may be made an impression upon with the mist or stain of human breath. Of human life. Stone hearts can finally break with love. He listens to her soft voice, now an excellent thing. Then he sees something – perhaps. Potential of life being lived, gives us possibility. Is there breath or no? Is it something or nothing?

The stage on which Shakespeare's play will materialise for us, the great O of the Globe itself, is a space for nothing but players, whom Shakespeare elsewhere calls "shadows", "nothing", "ciphers to this great account" (*Henry V*, Pro. 18), transforms its "airy shapes" into "something of great constancy" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.27) in the form of our communal experience of the play. It is the insubstantial breath that gives substance to our dreams, the stuff of our life, rounded by a sleep. The fool in the tarot deck is zero. And *Lear* reminds us that we exist together on this great stage of fools. Between the breath and the death there is hope of life. And in Nothing is our Everything.

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ROBERT WILLIAM HAYNES*

Replacing the Romantic Plantation: Horton Foote's Dramatic Engagement from *Gone with the Wind* (*The Musical*) to *Convicts*

Abstract

Harold Rome's musical version of *Gone with the Wind* was staged in 1972-3 in London, and, though not financially successful, it had a creditable onstage run. Texas playwright Horton Foote adapted Margaret Mitchell's very popular novel for this project, bringing with him a solid record of dramatic writing, including the Oscar-winning screenplay for *To Kill a Mockingbird*. This paper describes Foote's involvement with this musical production and his own personal situation during this time, showing how this experience contributed to his subsequent accomplishments. He was in fact a distant relative of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose *Uncle Tom's Cabin* affected the South much more violently than any other novel has, and his own descent from a wealthy Texas planter gave him a unique perspective on the burst of British enthusiasm for Confederate culture. Foote's personal understanding of the lasting impact of slavery upon his home region conflicted with the *Gone with the Wind* project's sentimental vision and motivated him to develop his own dramatic description of the plantation and its unromantic reality in his play *Convicts*, the second drama of his great nine-play *Orphans' Home Cycle*. In this play, the most significant music is that of the legendary blues guitarist Leadbelly. This essay describes the sometimes-ludicrous history of the London show and goes on to explain Foote's subsequent confrontation of negotiations between his great-great-grandfather 'Governor' Albert C. Horton (1798-1865) and Louisa Picquet, a former slave, who strove to purchase her still-enslaved mother from Horton. The outcome of this transaction inspired Foote to create Soll Gautier, the half-crazed plantation owner in *Convicts*, a savage character no one would associate with moonlight and magnolias.

KEYWORDS: Horton Foote; *Gone with the Wind*; Margaret Mitchell; Harold Rome; plantation; *To Kill a Mockingbird*; *Uncle Tom's Cabin*; musical; London; Albert C. Horton; *Convicts*; *Orphans' Home Cycle*

Horton Foote's home region of Southeast Texas, unlike other parts of that state, shares the geographic and social attributes of the cotton-farm-

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ing Deep South, and his plays and screenplays reflect that heritage.¹ Foote grew up in this cotton country, in which an ancestor of his had been a wealthy and influential planter, and his own awareness of the various forms of injustice perpetuated by the plantation system intensified as his career brought him in mid-life to the task of adapting Margaret Mitchell's best-selling novel *Gone with the Wind* (1936) as a London musical extravaganza. Later, with the hollow echoes of British Confederate thunder still in his ears, he would write his own plantation play, a work titled *Convicts*, which sets forth a very different view of plantation life, a view grounded in the boyhood experience of Foote's father.

Among the transformations of *Gone with the Wind*, the most significant was the 1939 film starring Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh, which won eight competitive Academy Awards, but there have been other versions as well. One of those adaptations, the musical production staged in London in 1972-3, starred Harve Presnell and June Ritchie, and it was Texas writer Horton Foote, who had won an Oscar for his script for the 1962 film *To Kill a Mockingbird*, who wrote the book for the program. This show had originated in Japan, where its title was *Scarlett*. Harold Rome wrote the music for this four-hour program, and *Scarlett* was successful enough to be thought worthy of adaptation for production elsewhere. Budgetary considerations made London a more desirable venue than the American possibilities, and thus the promoters of the show arranged for it to be adapted and re-titled for a 1972 opening as *Gone with the Wind*. Efforts were made to fill the cast with British actors (after all, Vivien Leigh was English), but the part of leading man Rhett Butler was won by Californian Harve Presnell. To assure some authenticity of dialect, Horton Foote was employed. His descent from a leading plantation owner in his home state may or may not have been known at the time, but the articulate gentility of Atticus Finch's discourse in *Mockingbird* had had a somewhat redemptive effect upon the South's reputation some ten years earlier. The Japanese *Scarlett* had not needed such authenticity, but, as it turned out, Foote was available, and his talent and character had been proclaimed as superlative by Harper Lee, the writer nearest in Southern fame and public success to Margaret Mitchell.

British theatrical producer Harold Fielding believed the romantic dimensions of Mitchell's popular novel about the individuals caught up in the rise and fall of the Confederacy would attract large audiences, justifying the expense of an elaborate production which the author of his obituary in the *Telegraph* refers to once as "arrestingly spectacular" and again as

¹ In his memoir *Beginnings*, Foote estimated that he had written "over sixty" plays and thirteen screenplays (270). Some scholars who have worked in his archive are inclined to believe that the number of his plays is considerably higher.

“unrelentingly spectacular” (“Harold Fielding” 2003). Perhaps he thought that the gentlemanly Confederates of a century earlier would offer an attractive fictional alternative to the contemporary Americans with their free-fire zones in Vietnam, but, whatever his view of political matters, he chose to gamble on the appeal of an established story he hoped to make yet more charming by musical delights.

In 1972, Horton Foote found himself in need of work that would help him meet the expenses of his family. He had had much beneficial employment since *To Kill a Mockingbird* had made him famous in film circles ten years earlier but writing assignments for him had grown scarcer as the theatre had plunged into experimentation and sensationalism and as his own unobtrusive kind of drama had fallen from fashion. The offer to write the book for the *Gone with the Wind* show was thus timely for him, and he was confident that his contribution would be valued as it had not been on a previous trip to England. In that earlier transatlantic expedition, Foote and his family had spent a summer in England as Horton worked on a script for Otto Preminger's film *Hurry Sundown* (1967), which was based on the 1964 novel by ‘K. B. Gilden’ (the pen name used by writers Katya and Bert Gilden). Though Preminger told Foote that he liked his script, he also decided not to use it, but he did ask to be allowed to list Foote as co-author of the screenplay. Foote, who liked Preminger, consented, though as time went by, he frequently disavowed any contribution to the work, which presented Southern racial injustice and resistance to it. Though Foote opposed prejudice and injustice and knew much about both, he tended to resist the stereotypical representation of Southerners and indeed the demonization of any group.

His later sojourn in London engaged him in work on a show transmogrifying a story dear to the hearts of those with a sentimental weakness for the ante-bellum South, including, of course, many of Foote's associates and family members. The London location must have been at times an odd place for a rural-born Southerner to formulate plantation dialogue for Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler, but Foote did need the money, and he was familiar with the business of moving a show forward under various forms of pressure. His first real stage job after arriving nearly penniless in New York in 1935 had been a non-speaking part in the spectacular Max Reinhardt production *The Eternal Road*, which began rehearsals in late 1936, and young Foote had earned the magnificent sum of \$25 a week scurrying about, silently miming Egyptians here and Hebrews there to the music of Kurt Weill, while singers including Lotte Lenya harmonized in what Brooks Atkinson called “a glorious pageant of great power and beauty” (Atkinson 1937). Later, of course, Foote had become one of the leading writers of the ‘Golden Age of Television’, putting together scripts for live produc-

tion and achieving some memorable contributions to this new form of entertainment. He had written his first screenplay, *Storm Fear*, an adaptation of a not-very-thrilling thriller, in 1955, and had, with the Oscar for *Mockingbird*, drawn to himself the attention of such figures as Otto Preminger. And through all of this diverse activity Foote remained as active as possible in writing stage plays, so there was nothing in the London project that challenged him artistically. The challenges facing him were personal ones related both to family and to his sense of identity as writer.

In 1972, Foote's parents were declining in health at their Texas home while Horton and his wife sought to deal with the sometimes-difficult choices made by their four children, now ranging in age from thirteen to twenty-two, back home in New Hampshire. Their eldest son was eligible for the military draft at this time, with a dangerous Vietnam assignment a real possibility for all conscripts. He eventually decided to enlist, which gave him an alternative to being sent to a combat zone, but the anxiety accompanying this process added greatly to his father's distractions at the time the London project offered a solution to pressing financial challenges. The late 1960s and early 1970s were of course full of social conflict, with civil rights, resistance to the war, and public anger about governmental misbehaviour occupying the public mind.

Though Foote had been tough enough to earn his dramaturgic spurs in Depression New York, his writing life now required more than personal fortitude, as family concerns and the necessity of a transatlantic separation posed formidable obstacles. Foote's level-headed wife Lillian, as always in their long marriage, held the fort and provided both guidance and encouragement, and Foote's loyal agent Lucy Kroll, already a friend of thirty years' standing, provided helpful publicity and steadily sought new opportunities for him. Both women, incidentally, regarded Foote's dramatic work with keen respect. It was Lillian who had persuaded Horton to take on the *To Kill a Mockingbird* screenplay assignment, and Lucy Kroll's energetic advocacy of her friend's art was monumental, as her archives at the Library of Congress testify.

And there were further concerns which had their effects upon the playwright's imagination at this time. At the space of a decade from his greatest success, the Academy Award for the Harper Lee film, Foote remained aware that his abiding artistic strength lay in an imaginative exploration of the past, with all its illusions, real and bogus attractions, and its often-ignored cruelties. The world presented by the musical version of *Gone with the Wind* was familiar to him as a Southerner descended from plantation owners, but it was alien to him as well, and not only because of the British environment, in which his mastery of the drawl – a pronunciation he had worked long and hard to lose in his days in drama school in California

– placed him in a special way in the fictitious fabrication at hand. The ante-bellum fantasy was also alien because the romantic presentation of this dream world was very much at odds with his own informed understanding of what life was like on a plantation. He felt the disparity between the popular enthusiasm for ante-bellum chivalry and the historical consequences of the slavery system that had made plantations possible. His stint on the elaborate semi-opera *The Eternal Road* had shown him the application of dramatic art and music to a critical social issue, but in *Gone with the Wind*, he saw little more than misconceived sentimentality. Of course, as a professional, he charged forward and did his best, just as in his student days he had played a lead role in blackface in Paul Green's play *The No 'Count Boy*, and as he would later read the lines of Confederate President Jefferson Davis in the celebrated Ken Burns TV series *The Civil War*.

Foote's contribution to the film *To Kill a Mockingbird* had been a controversial declaration of sympathy for the civil rights movement. Though he would vigorously maintain later that he had only missed the 1963 Academy Awards ceremony because he had thought he had no chance of winning, we need to remember the emotional climate of 1963, the year Medgar Evers was murdered in June and John Kennedy was murdered in November. Though the author of this essay was twelve that year, living near the Florida line in Georgia, which is about as deep in the Deep South as one can get, he remembers well the anxiety and nearly universal public anger of those days. As a native of a small town in Texas, Foote may well have felt that he should be with his family as this film competed for Oscars. In any case, his family history gave him sufficient cause to deplore his region's hostility to the civil rights movement.

Foote's great-great-grandfather was Albert Clinton Horton, who as a Texas pioneer and early statesman had acquired considerable wealth in agriculture after fighting against Mexico and serving as the first elected lieutenant-governor of the new state. Though some contemporary detractors complained that Horton, who had narrowly missed being massacred with Colonel Fannin's soldiers at Goliad in 1836, was no hero and should have led his handful of men in an Alamo-esque suicide attack on the Mexican army, public opinion generally favoured the man, and his generosity was memorialized by the \$5000 donation he made for the foundation of what is now Baylor University. Visitors to the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas, can still ring a large bell donated in 1858 by A.C. Horton to what was then Baylor Female Seminary. Horton's extensive landholdings made him a major figure in Texas agriculture, and, of course, his plantations were sustained by slave labour.²

² The best summary of Horton's career is still that of Ellenberger 1985, though more

Various records have survived describing Albert C. Horton's dealings with his slaves. One such document maintains that as a master he showed considerable compassion and concern for the souls of those whose bodies he owned. In an account of Horton's conduct toward the religious life of his slaves, Baptist leader Rufus C. Burleson wrote:

Nothing ever impressed me more than his tender and deep interest for the comfort and religious welfare of his slaves. He owned nearly 300 – a large number of them members of the Baptist Church. He made a church house, built convenient between his plantations, and employed a preacher to preach for them. Bro. Noah Hill, his pastor, said it was the most touching scene he ever saw to see Gov. Horton and his noble wife reading the Bible and praying for their servants. (1901: 711)

Another less laudatory source is the book *Louisa Picquet, the Octoroon, or, Inside Views of Southern Domestic Life*, published in New York in 1861 by the abolitionist minister Hiram Mattison. This text consists of interviews of the former slave Louisa Picquet by Mattison, with commentary by the latter. Louisa's mother Elizabeth Ramsey had been sold with her many years earlier, with different buyers purchasing each. Louisa managed to become free later, and soon began a search for her mother, who she remembered had been bought by a Texan named Horton. She eventually located the man, who was 'Governor' Albert C. Horton (by Texas tradition, lieutenant governors can be called governor, besides which Horton had served as acting governor in 1846 while the person elected to that post was fighting in Mexico). She was able to write to her mother and then to Horton, whom she asked to allow her to purchase her mother's freedom.³ Horton replied that he would sell Louisa's mother for one thousand dollars, and the younger woman soon began recruiting assistance and trying to raise this seemingly impossible sum. Some Northerners refused aid because Louisa Picquet did not look as they thought an African American woman should look, and one minister who was approached in vain was Henry Ward Beecher, who was, like his famous sister (the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), distantly kin to the future playwright Horton Foote. With funds slowly accumulating but not yet approaching the required sum, an appeal was made to Eliza Horton, Albert's wife, and she reduced Elizabeth Ramsey's price to \$900, an amount Louisa and her associates were able to assemble, thus enabling the liberation of Ms. Ramsey. Though the swashbuckling image of 'Governor' Horton still conveys associations of Texas' victory over Mexico, the story of his conduct in this matter of a young woman's love for her

recent work such as Fisher 2014, for example, should also be consulted.

³ For a full discussion of Louisa Picquet's struggle, see Pitts 2007.

mother necessarily qualifies any jingoistic glow his name might provoke.

Add to this his great-great-grandson's recollection in Foote's autobiographical volume *Farewell*:

On a fourteen-mile hike to complete some phase of becoming a Boy Scout, I stopped in a country store near Iago for a bottle of soda water. On the gallery of the store was an elderly black man, and as I drank my soda water we got to talking. When I told him my name, he said he had been born a slave on my great-great-grandfather's plantation. I have never forgotten the impact that made on me. Slavery, up until that time, had been an abstract statistic in other people's stories: . . . But as I looked into that man's tired, sorrowful face, I was shocked to realize that this abstraction, spoken of so lightly, was a living, suffering human being. The tales of the past bore a new reality after that. (Foote 1999: 128)

The Horton Foote commissioned to write the libretto for the 1972 London version of *Gone with the Wind* was thus an artist who had meditated deeply on slavery and its effects both on slaves and their owners. He was not about to defy the expectations of a hoop-skirt-hungry public and ruin the sales of mint juleps and sabres, but one wonders if at the raising of the large onstage carpet to reveal on its lower side a huge Confederate battle flag Foote did not at least briefly think of Leni Riefenstahl and the ideology her art sought to serve. In fact, there is some circumstantial evidence that the playwright's sense of the Old South was focused by his English experience, a theme that will be further discussed later.

Well, the show went on, with vast fuss and bother, a grand opening, an appearance by a member of the royal family, and a certain hopeful inclination on the parts of certain journalists to celebrate the popularizing genius of Harold Fielding, the strong showing in Japan of the earlier version of the show, which was titled *Scarlett*, and the manifestly spectacular stage effects which were intended to carry the program. Horton Foote thriftily accumulated enough funds to fly his wife to London for the last couple of weeks of his stay, and the show went on, with Princess Anne greeting the acting company on the first night and the Foote family departing the next day for their home in New Hampshire.

Some of the early reviews were mixed, with Ronald Bryden in the *New York Times* praising the first half of the show but finding in the second half "a soapy odor of synthetic romance". He concludes:

The only points at which Joe Layton's production seems likely to be memorable in its own right are its dances and some of its swift, spectacular staging. But as he says, his "Gone with the Wind" isn't aimed at critics, but at the boxoffice. There, it's obviously as unstoppable as Sherman's army. (Bryden 1972)

However, it was the negative reviews that prevailed, with Clive Barnes huffily proclaiming, "The show, staged by Joe Layton, is mildly spectacular, and spectacularly uninteresting" (Barnes 1972). The most savage of these reviews was that of Rex Reed, whose indignation fired him to some very amusing observations, most of which contained utter disdain for what he saw as a ridiculous program. He sets the scene for his massacre by describing "the old Drury Lane, where a mighty cannon pointed toward the sky, Cockney actors sang 'Dixie' in Confederate uniforms, and British debutantes in hoop skirts greeted the arriving celebrities and critics by passing out Confederate flags while a Dixieland band played 'Old Black Joe'". He goes on to itemize aspects of the performance he finds inept or ludicrous, noting "I can remember nothing in my theater-going history I consider a bigger disaster" (Reed 1972).

All of the critics who saw the first night's performance were obliged to comment on one particular moment, which Reed describes with some vigour. He writes:

The biggest show-stopping moment on opening night occurred as Scarlett tried to drag a horse with stage fright across the swamps back to Tara in the wake of war. "I will go!" she kept shouting, but only the horse did. The audience screamed with laughter and applause as the poor nag filled the stage with fresh manure. Then the mad soldier who tried to attack Scarlett from behind a tree fell dead from her gunfire under the curtain line. "I'll never go hungry again," wept the brave actress who played Scarlett as the corpse, seeing the first-act curtain falling, rolled over to keep from being killed. Naturally, he rolled right into the horse's main contribution to the evening amidst a holocaust of hysteria and chaos among the stagehands. (Reed 1972)

No doubt Horton Foote, who like most actors had seen a good store of hilarious moments onstage, appreciated the humour of this episode, even if his own reputation was marginally involved, and Reed, who was born in Ft. Worth, treated him quite gently in this review. "Horton Foote's libretto", writes Reed, "has a Southern feeling about it, although it seems spoken in comic-strip bubbles without much time for revelation" (1972). Perhaps Reed recalled the deliberation of speech in *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *The Trip to Bountiful*, but he surely suggests that Foote has a dramaturgic power not realized here. In any case, this review may have given the playwright a sense that he had escaped well from Margaret Mitchell's imaginary world.

So, what was meant earlier by the suggestion that Foote's sense of the South was focused by his experience with this London show? The fact is that upon his return to the United States he soon faced the loss of both of his parents, his father in 1973 and his mother in the following year. As he coped with their respective declines and deaths, he took on, with some re-

luctance, another plantation project, the composition of a screenplay for a proposed film titled *Many Mansions*, which was to be based on the 1972 book *The Children of Pride*, a collection of plantation letters from the archives of a Georgia family during the ante-bellum period and succeeding years.⁴ After a considerable amount of labour with manuscripts and extensive drafts of this work, he was told that the project would not go forward.⁵ Upon the death of his mother, Foote went to the family home in Wharton, where he pondered over the old documents and letters his parents had left. At the age of nearly sixty, he resolved to write a series of plays based on his father's early life, his courtship, and his hard-earned acceptance as substantial member of the town's business community. Since the senior Foote had been rejected by his family in childhood and had been obliged by poverty to work in a store on a plantation fifteen miles south of Wharton, the playwright devoted *Convicts*, the second play of this cycle, to the boy's adventures on this place. While the nature of young Foote's circumstances there must remain unclear, his son's fictionalized account quite possibly draws upon information from his father's recollections. The plantation owner in Foote's play is clearly based on William Toliver 'Tol' Taylor (1838-1926), to whom Foote's mother, the former Harriet Gautier Brooks, was related by marriage, and the character, Soll Gautier, has even been given one of her family names. Horton Foote has given this character attributes which no doubt depart considerably from those of Tol Taylor, but perhaps the playwright felt that after some fifty years it was not necessary to be excessively sympathetic to the former planter.

On old Soll's plantation, things were much as they had been before the Civil War. Though slavery had been banned, landowners could still rent convicts from state prisons and work them as though emancipation had never happened. This imagined plantation is Foote's response to the romantic sentiment that drew such acclaim in Margaret Mitchell's novel and in Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh's dramatic film version of that novel. Soll Gautier is a colourful old rascal, of course, but he is also a murderer, an exploiter of the women on his place, and a great liar whose promises to those he encounters are worthless. He does not die easily, emerging at one point from his coffin after he has been deemed ready for burial, and when he finally does die, he retains a powerful grip upon the arm of the boy who is based on Horton Foote's father. It is a black man who helps the boy break

⁴ See Myers 1972.

⁵ According to Watson 2003: 114, Foote prepared for this adaptation by reading Charles Colcock Jones' *The Religious Instruction of the Negroes in the United States* (1842) and Eugene D. Genovese's *The Political Economy of Slavery* (1961). It was the letters of the family of C.C. Jones that constituted the primary material of *The Children of Pride*.

that grip. Robert Duvall played Old Soll in the film version of this play *Convicts*, and perhaps he made the old man slightly too likable. In the play text, the old man is a figure from a nightmare.

Foote's play *Convicts*, then, can be seen as a destination for a writer shaped by the peculiar history of the South and its old social system. His connections are interesting in regard to his journey, with Harriet Beecher Stowe's family one remote relation (Harriet's mother was a Foote), Margaret Mitchell the author of a work on which one of his own works was based, and Harper Lee, who was a close friend, a third best-selling novelist and another whose fiction he laboured to re-shape into dramatic form. In his trip to London to imagine a show projecting an image Foote knew was not realistic, he must have developed in his own mind the possibility of a play that would tell the truth.

That play, *Convicts*, provides the historical foundation for Horton Foote's *magnum opus*, his nine-play *Orphans' Home Cycle*, one of the masterworks of twentieth-century drama. In this sequence of dramas, Foote engages the past of his region and his family, focusing upon his own father's early struggle to establish himself in a community which was itself emerging from conditions which were in some key respects primitive and makeshift. At the beginning of the first play of the *Cycle*, the year is 1902. The setting is Harrison, Texas, a fictionalized version of Foote's hometown of Wharton, which had been established in 1846, a decade after Sam Houston defeated Mexican general Santa Anna at San Jacinto, some seventy-nine miles to the east. Foote's father, Albert Horton Foote, Senior, had been born in 1890, and Horace Robedaux, the boy whose life constitutes the central thread of the *Cycle*, is based on him. The playwright's intimate familiarity with Wharton and its geographical surroundings was reinforced by his numerous familial connections there and by the nostalgic preoccupations which had made memories of the pre-Appomattox South a comfort to many of those he knew in his childhood.

But for Foote as artist, the view of the South was filtered by his experience in the larger world of the urban North, and the perspectives he developed after leaving Wharton in 1933 enabled for him a kind of objectivity that dissociated his experience from the attitudes and prejudices which still held sway in much of the South. Though Foote himself grew up in comfortable if not luxurious circumstances, his father had faced a very different life, one of abandonment and poverty, in a situation overshadowed by a family history once marked by wealth and power. Horton Senior had emerged from this struggle a kind and responsible man, a small-town merchant whose consideration for his black customers was not usual in a town whose politics were governed by a group calling itself 'The White Man's Union' (Castleberry 2014: 5).

As Horton Junior sought acting roles in Depression New York and meditated on the vagaries of a history that had interwoven slavery and racial discrimination with the daily lives of the ordinary people living in this Texas cotton town, and as he considered the vanished fortunes of his Horton and Foote ancestors, he seems to have realized that his own life's work lay in the direction of an investigation of this past and its consequences. His first play *Wharton Dance*, a short piece written as an exercise for the acting group he had joined in 1937, set forth a sequence of events occurring at a high school dance in his home town, and the magnetic attraction of his family's native region governed his dramatic inspiration in the nearly seven following decades of his life. Though he would take on many diverse professional assignments and write steadily about matters grounded back in Texas, it was after the deaths of his parents, Albert Horton Foote, Sr., and Hallie Brooks Foote, in the early 1970s that he found himself embarking upon a comprehensive dramatic project which would commemorate his father's history, a history which itself reflected the larger sequence of events that had shaped early Texas.

The region around Wharton had been an active environment in early Texas, from the days when Spanish rule prevailed and the Karankawa Indians, known as cannibals, dominated the coastal realm. As white adventurers moved in from the east, some motivated by the prospect of free or cheap land and others by a variety of reasons ranging from the idealistic to the desperate, this land of buffalo, bear, wolf, and storm saw much conflict, and those who survived there tended to develop a toughness and sometimes a volatility that could manifest itself in both good and bad ways. Entrepreneurs excited by the options open to them in such a place were inclined on the one hand to establish a protective order and on the other to resist oppressive authority of the kind thrown off further east in 1776. Those with dreams of great success in agriculture strove successfully to import the slave system that had enriched a part of society in the South, and few of the new Texans felt serious qualms about pushing the Indians aside, or under. Mexico, whose power remained a substantial obstacle to the hopes of many, required a major effort before it could be effectively neutralized, but that issue was resolved after Sam Houston's crushing victory at San Jacinto, and, as the Civil War approached, some of Horton Foote's ancestors were doing very well for themselves in Texas.

The role of Albert Clinton Horton kept in his great-great-grandson's mind two different kinds of admonitory ideas. One of these was much like that medieval idea illustrated by the image of the Wheel of Fortune and described in various moral treatises of the *de casibus* genre, works which serve to remind mortals that fortune is fickle and that worldly things pass away. 'Governor' Horton had seemed very fortunate, overcoming a youth-

ful gambling addiction and achieving political success in Alabama before moving to Texas, establishing a busy commercial presence in Matagorda, and just barely escaping the Goliad massacre. He then went on to assume a number of leadership roles in early Texas while acquiring plantation lands and the numerous slaves required to work them, all the while encouraging and supporting the establishment of churches and religion. Yet his wealth depended upon the institution of slavery, and, with emancipation and the end of the Civil War, his prosperity ended, and he died in the autumn of 1865, leaving a much-diminished inheritance which soon became the object of conflict and litigation.

The second admonitory idea is that of the deep flaw in human character that authorized the slave system and its inhumanity, a flaw that drew otherwise decent and responsible people into an unthinking acceptance of brutality, exploitation, and selfishness. A.C. Horton was reported to care very much for the souls of his slaves, but his fierce defiance of Northern Abolitionism was quite in accord with prevalent attitudes in his world. And, in the story of Louisa Picquet told by one of those Yankee Abolitionists, the theme of sexual exploitation of slaves, a theme largely ignored down South, makes it clear that plantation patronage often involved much more than providing Sunday school. Horton Foote knew well that many of the blacks of his home region were blood relatives of many of the whites as a direct result of relationships which, though officially forbidden, were in fact tolerated more than anyone liked to acknowledge.

Thus, in the play *Convicts*, set at the beginning of the twentieth century, Foote presents a plantation that has fundamentally retained the nature of the plantation of slavery days. Instead of owning slaves, Soll Gautier cheaply rents convicts from the state, convicts whose incarceration is determined by arbitrary decisions often entirely unrelated to the administration of justice. He disdains all compassion for the convicts and takes pride in seeing them worked hard regardless of health or condition. In the senile paranoia which characterizes his last days, Soll contends with old fears and desires, vaguely recalling the now-vanished black women he once had available on the plantation and facing moments of panic as he imagines convicts have escaped their chains and come to kill him.⁶ His fear of wild animals, while not entirely anachronistic, suggests the earlier world in which wolves and bears did pose a threat to the unwary, and his sudden inclination to befriend young Horace Robedaux, who not only promises to guard Soll's body from wild animals but also keeps that promise after Soll's

⁶ The author of this essay has suggested elsewhere that one of the convicts feared by Soll may have been his biological son (Haynes 2016: 157).

death, merely strengthens the false claim of the pioneer myth, a claim still largely honoured by uncritical posterity.

Soll's ignorance, brutality, and bad faith contrast vividly with the romantic elegance and grandeur shown in some other literary representations of the ante-bellum plantation, and his rough ferocity and sociopathy would not fit neatly into Scarlett O'Hara's pre-war world. Horace Robedaux, the young protagonist of *Convicts*, is the son of Corella Thornton Robedaux, the granddaughter of a major Texas planter. Foote bases Corella on his own grandmother, who was born Corella Horton, the granddaughter of Albert C. Horton, who had led cavalry against the Mexican army, helped locate the site of a new state capital (now Austin), served as lieutenant governor, and had become acting governor while the elected governor was off in Mexico. A dashing figure in the ante-bellum world, Horton owned extensive properties near Matagorda and near Wharton. In Foote's play, Horace Robedaux, an impoverished semi-orphan whose father has died and whose mother has abandoned him, lives on the Gautier plantation, sleeping in the plantation store near a black couple employed there who have befriended him.

In Horace's predicament, we see no nostalgia for the ante-bellum world or for Confederate glory. Instead, Horace depends upon his kind black friends for advice and hospitality, even though their own situation is as financially precarious as his own. The embodiment of the plantation past is Soll Gautier, a blustering liar and at times ferocious monomaniac, obsessed with the assertion of his power and hatred of his enemies. Clearly, Soll was never influenced by the literary tradition or by the courtesy and honour revered by some members of the Southern aristocracy. Instead, he is a rough, fierce slave-driving brute whose only charm lies in the half-senile weakness old age has finally imposed upon him. When he orders his workers in the middle of the night to build him a coffin and they do so, he lies down in the coffin to test it out, and falls asleep, making his men believe he is dead till suddenly he awakens and gives them a shock. Later, when he does die, he expires while clutching the arm of young Horace, who is the only other white person in the vicinity, and, even in death, his grip remains strong. This bizarre moment must be understood in a larger context, for Horace is in a sense the destitute heir of the lost plantations of his famous ancestor, a man who, like Soll Gautier, turned vast acreage of the unsettled Texas frontier into an agricultural enterprise based on exploitation of those required to provide labour. And like Horace's wealthy ancestor, Soll will leave his estate in a dissolving chaos.

Horton Foote's ancestor Albert C. Horton, though a far more reflective and civilized man than Soll Gautier, was, like nearly all of his Texas contemporaries (with the notable exception of Sam Houston) a fervent se-

cessionist. His plantations held a large number of slaves, and he was no doubt aware that the Northern enthusiasm for emancipation was a threat to his economic future, which consideration strengthened his resistance to such developments as the rise of Abraham Lincoln to the Presidency. As it turned out, Horton's fears were fully justified, and the victory of the North did mean the loss of his wealth. He died in Matagorda shortly after Appomattox, and his son Robert Horton, a Confederate veteran, lived out his life struggling for a modest income. 'Governor' Horton's wife Eliza managed to secure a pauper's pension and made some unsuccessful efforts to recover some resources from her husband's estate, but she went to live out her life near Goliad, the scene of one of her husband's great adventures, in the home of her son, who was for a time postmaster in that area. Judging from a surviving letter, Eliza remained cheerful in old age and enjoyed the simple life of rural Texas.⁷ An investigation suggests that she died in Weesatche, near Goliad, and is buried in a forgotten grave in a cemetery named Buzzards' Roost. Her husband at least has a distinguished if modest monument in Matagorda Cemetery which catches the fierce hurricane winds that blast that coast.

As Horton Foote went to work upon the cycle of plays written in response to his parents' deaths, he focused at first upon the figure of his father, who as a boy suffered from poverty and isolation in the small town in which his family had once held power and wealth. The first play shows the progressive abandonment of young Horace Robedaux by his family and his deceased father's friends, and the second play, *Convicts*, places Horace on a plantation like that owned by his great-grandfather, although it is also like that owned by Simon Legree, the chief villain of the very influential novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), written by Foote's distant kinswoman Harriet Beecher Stowe. And the Soll Gautier who runs the plantation in *Convicts* resembles Legree far more than he does Texas planter Albert C. Horton, who had devoted much of his energy to public service both in Alabama and in Texas, supporting churches and educational institutions before losing his wealth with the fall of the Confederacy. Soll, however, obsessed with the power he wields on his remote plantation, works his convicts even on Christmas Day and orders that no hymns be sung at his funeral.

Here it may be appropriate briefly to point out some similarities between Soll Gautier and Harriet Beecher Stowe's villainous planter Simon Legree, with a table suggesting evidence that Foote had at least peripherally in mind.

⁷ See Horton 1875.

<i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i>, Stowe	<i>Convicts</i>, Foote
Simon Legree. Master of plantation, a cruel, brutal man oblivious to humanity.	Soll Gautier. Master of plantation, a cruel, brutal man oblivious to humanity.
Slaves are worked seven days a week.	Convicts are worked every day.
Simon is a sexual predator.	Soll is a (former?) sexual predator.
Simon hates religion.	Soll hates religion (does not like hymns).
Simon kills slaves.	Soll kills convicts.
One black woman talks back to Simon.	One black woman talks back to Soll.
Simon dies in drunken dementia.	Soll dies in drunken dementia.
Young white man buries Uncle Tom. "There is no monument to mark the last resting-place of our friend. He needs none" (Stowe 1852: 408).	White boy seeks to memorialize dead convict. Later, he helps bury Soll, who gets no monument.
Simon hates hymns, requires slaves to entertain him with crude music.	Soll asks a convict to sing "Golden Slippers", but the man says he doesn't remember it.
Tom has had help to write home.	Convict Leroy Kendricks can't write, and his family can't read.

Foote thus seems to have reflected not only on his own family's plantation past as he took on the task of writing the *Orphans' Home Cycle*, but he also had in mind Harriet Beecher Stowe's vision of the plantation. And it is also likely that he drew upon another source, his friend Stark Young's plantation novel *So Red the Rose* (1934), a book which had a strong claim to being definitive in the moonlight and magnolias market until being suddenly torpedoed in that realm by Margaret Mitchell's 1936 book. Young, who died in 1963, was enjoying something of a revival in 1975 with the publication of John Pilkington's 1454-page *Stark Young: A Life in the Arts, Letters 1900-1962*, and Foote was no doubt glad to see his dear friend being celebrated, despite his own disinclination to revere the plantation past. And certainly Young's novel was creditable in its background research, as Pilkington points out in his Twayne volume in the section titled "*So Red the Rose*, Authenticity" (1975: 121-4). However, Foote's admiration for Young and his brilliant drama criticism did not extend to Young's unqualified sympathy for ante-bellum plantation life in the South.

Since Foote had worked hard to compose a script for the London *Gone with the Wind* musical show, with its set of songs sung by characters rang-

ing from Rhett Butler and Scarlett O'Hara to Ashley Wilkes, his fiancée Melanie, and the slaves, Mammy and Prissy, he may have felt some satisfaction in including in *Convicts* songs which suggest a perspective which is perhaps more authentic. Crystal Brian observes, "In *Convicts*, probably the most poetic of Foote's cycle plays, music is linked with images of mankind in chains and various symbols of death" (1998: 102). She goes on to quote a lecture given by Foote at Texas A&M University:

In *Convicts*, I use the songs, "Ain't No More Cane on the Brazos," "Rock Island Line" and "Golden Slippers." The first two are heard offstage, sung by the convicts as they work. "Golden Slippers" is sung by a convict, who can't really sing, at the burial of Soll, the owner of the plantation having forbidden any hymns to be sung at his funeral. The great folk singer, Leadbelly, told me many years ago that he sang "Rock Island Line" while he was working on a Texas prison farm.⁸ (Ibid.)

The contrast between the Gautier plantation of this play and the romanticized plantation of the musical *Gone with the Wind* draws strength from a realism that meets the preferences of common sense. One of the better headlines on a story dealing with the London show was "Tara! Tara! Tara!" which both knowingly mocks human susceptibility to moonlight and magnolia stuff and seems gently to endorse the moral of the Confederate horse's spectacular incontinence. In "Sailing after Lunch," Wallace Stevens has written:

The romantic should be here.
It should be there.
It ought to be everywhere.
But the romantic must never remain,
Mon Dieu, and must never again return.
(Wallace Stevens 1954: 120)

Facing a cosmetically reconstructed Southern past, Horton Foote, though he was no enemy of human dreams, regarded nostalgia for that past as a dangerous emotion in a world still seeking to recover from the consequences of slavery and the great war which had devastated the South. Recognizing some inevitability in the celebration of the more civilized aspects of plantation life, he also saw clearly that humans who have power over their fellow humans are all too likely to abuse that power, and thus he resisted glorification of the Confederacy and the mythology which arose around the ante-bellum way of plantation life.

Among the literary critics who have commented on *Convicts*, Laurin

⁸ A slightly different version of the text of Foote's A&M lecture is in Foote 2004: 115-36.

Porter, whose book on the *Orphans' Home Cycle* provides extensive commentary on all of the nine plays, has discussed the contrast between the Gautier plantation and the version of the Southern plantation imagined by those who sought nostalgically to represent ante-bellum life as highly civilized and sophisticated. She explains:

In the idealized version of the plantation myth, the land is lush and fertile, producing an abundance of crops, . . . The fertility of the land is reflected in the fertility of the family: a gracious and accomplished wife, beautiful daughters, and gallant sons. This harmonious picture is completed by a group of happy, well-cared-for slaves, regarded as an extension of the family. (Porter 2003: 196)

Turning to a discussion of the Gautier plantation, she continues: "The portrait presented in *Convicts* presents a sharp contrast to this ideal". She goes on to point out that "the lushness of the land has become a threat rather than a boon" (ibid.), and that Soll Gautier's reprehensible conduct and personal isolation set his world at odds with the romanticized myth of the plantation. Referring to Margaret Mitchell's novel and the famous film version of it, Porter calls *Gone with the Wind* "the quintessential popularization of the plantation myth" (157), but she makes no reference to Horton Foote's involvement with the London musical show or to his other extended engagement with plantation lore in his never-completed dramatization of Robert Manson Myers' award-winning book *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (extensive drafts of which are in the Horton Foote Collection at the DeGolyer Library at Southern Methodist University). Interestingly, her analysis also disregards what would have been for Foote a critical feature of the plantation past, his great-great-grandfather's status as wealthy Texas planter and slave-owner.⁹ After all, Albert Clinton Horton's main plantation house Sycamore Grove was still standing in Wharton, Texas, in Foote's childhood and indeed up to the early 1960s. Another house which was once Horton's residence still stands as of 2019 in Matagorda, Texas.

The literary creation of plantations demonstrating the cruelty of slavery was of course nothing new, as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had appeared in 1852, putting forth an emphatic alternative to favourable representations of contemporary large-scale Southern agricultural operations, but for Horton Foote, schooled in the New York theatre to greater objectivity in assessment of the history of his home region, the involvement of his own family in slavery and its consequences bore heavily upon his compulsion to write.

In his dramatic exploration of a Texas plantation like those on which his

⁹ She does briefly refer to A.C. Horton in Porter 2009: 25n3.

ancestors and other key figures of early Texas had held sway, Foote sought to stage his conflict of human purpose in a world divested of the sentimental simplicity that had drawn the enthusiasm of movie-goers and of that London audience that had paid to experience the musical show *Gone with the Wind*. He does seek a simplicity, that of childhood innocence and the decency of working people who have no escape from the cruelty of established power, but beyond the individual predicaments of these characters he invokes a larger historical vision extending from the semi-mythical days of early Texas through to the formation in a young man of a virtue that defies the hostile influence of environment and even tradition. And this virtue, in Foote's own creative mind, was the force that made his own art possible, for the Horace Robedaux who shared his tobacco and sympathy with the doomed convict, who sought to remember the names of the nameless victims of the Texas penal system, who preferred to sleep in the store near his black friends instead of in Soll Gautier's plantation house, whose main purpose in life was to earn enough money to buy a tombstone for his father, this young Horace is based on young Albert Horton Foote, the playwright's father, who, despite the severe demands of the Depression, provided funds for his son to go to acting school in California, thus enabling his son to begin a theatrical career of some seventy years and to set forth the human reality of the world he centres in his small town in Texas.

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Erase and Rewrite. Ancient Texts, Modern Palimpsests¹

Abstract

Aeschylus spent his last days in Sicily, upon invitation by the tyrant of Syracuse: the same town, since 1914, has been hosting a world famous festival of classical productions, in the ancient Greek theatre, which re-opened with the performance of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1914). My paper aims at showing the peculiar connection between ancient Greece and modern Sicily and particularly how Aeschylus' legacy is received and transformed by Sicilian playwrights. First of all, his trilogy *Oresteia* was (and is) frequently chosen in order to celebrate the foundation (or rebirth) of a community, all over the island. My main case study is located in Gibellina, a town in Western Sicily destroyed by an earthquake in 1968. Many artists were involved in the process of its reconstruction. One of them, the Sicilian artist Emilio Isgrò, wrote and staged his first plays in Gibellina, including a poetic adaptation from Aeschylus' trilogy: the monumental *Oresteia di Gibellina* 1983-1985 (recently republished with other plays, such as *Medea*, 2002 and *Odissea Cancellata*, 2003, and with a selection of critical essays: Isgrò 2011). The key concept of this paper is borrowed by a fundamental technique created by Isgrò, which inspired his creations both as an artist and a playwright: to erase and rewrite a text, so that its profound essence may emerge – not on the surface, but in the backlight.

KEYWORDS: palimpsest; to erase and rewrite; Aeschylus' *Oresteia*; Emilio Isgrò; Gibellina, Sicily

La Sicilia è diventata un palcoscenico perenne e senza scampo

Emilio Isgrò²

1. Foreword

During the second Persian War, the Acropolis of Athens burned down. Such a symbolic, collective wound left deep traces and memories in sur-

¹ I thank Guido Avezzù, Elena Servito (INDA Archive), Gaspare Urso and the staff of INDA Foundation, and Wendy Lloyd for revising my translation.

² "Sicily has become a perennial stage, with no escape" (Isgrò 1986 and 2011: 36).

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vived texts, from Aeschylus' *Persians* (472 BCE) to Herodotus' *Stories* (ca 450 BCE). New monuments were built on site, but older ones were not forgotten, nor thrown away, nor destroyed. They were buried under the new Acropolis, which 'covered' the old one and rose on the same ground, like an ancient palimpsest. This is the key concept of this paper, but its focus is not Athens. It is Sicily, an island which has been playing a role in the Mediterranean since ancient times. Sicily and the *Magna Graecia* were a 'Promised Land' for the Greeks of that time, as America appeared to modern immigrants, and still is today beyond the Mexican Wall. Sicily welcomed also the same tragic poet who had fought Persians and had written a tragedy on the Persian Wars. Aeschylus was first invited in the 470s by Hiero I of Syracuse, and after the staging of his trilogy *Oresteia* (458 BCE) left his *polis* which suffered a political crisis and risked a civil war. He chose "to go west", looking for a brand new start. He migrated to Sicily, invited again by the tyrant of Syracuse; there, Aeschylus spent his last days, until he died in Gela.³

Following his traces, my research will focus on modern Sicily, in order to show how the island keeps erasing and re-writing its history, and how its theatre tradition remains faithful to the memory of Aeschylus who was there twice: his path seems to be continued by most Sicilian festival and classical productions which flourish in many places. Sicily holds tight to its Greek roots, and yet moves further, thanks to authors, directors, and actors, who bring back to life ancient texts for a modern audience, over the decades. First, it is worth looking back at the past century: among Sicilian cities, Syracuse, in particular, has a splendid Greek theatre, which has been hosting a famous festival of classical productions since 1914. As mentioned before, Aeschylus was a glorious host of Syracuse's tyrant, he celebrated the city and its colonies, and he left therefore a strong, symbolic legacy. His dramas, and particularly his trilogy *Oresteia* was (and is) frequently chosen to celebrate a new start: the Greek theatre re-opened after a centuries-long

³ See *Aeschyli Vita* 8, 9, 10, 11e 18; *Sch. ad Aristoph. Ran.* 1028; Paus. 1.2.3, Basta Donzelli 2008: 1-17; 39-47; Beltrametti 2011: 149-68. See also the unpublished paper by Ioanna Papadopoulou, "Nothing to do with the extant *Persians*? . . . νῦν ὑπὲρ πάντων ἁγῶν, (Aesch. *Pers.* 405), the riddle of the (second) staging of *The Persians* in Syracuse and the lost *Aitnaiai*", delivered at the Fonte Aretusa Symposium (12-15 June 2019: abstract online at <https://fontearetusa.wordpress.com/confirmed-abstracts-as-of-12-26-18/>) The study center which hosted the symposium, based in Syracuse, is focused on Sicily as the 'Western Greece'. Also, Luciano Canfora in a recent conference organized by IN-DA Foundation in Syracuse (25 June 2019) stressed how the political climate following *Oresteia*'s performance in Athens may have influenced the choice of Aeschylus to move to Sicily. For a recent overview on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, and its modern performances, see also S. Bigliuzzi (ed.) (2018).

silence with the performance of *Agamemnon* (1914), and after WW1 the trilogy continued with *Libation Bearers* (1921). Also after WW2, in 1948, a modern *Oresteia* (translated by Manara Valgimigli) marked the renovated festival and a new era which culminated in 1960 with another key-performance of the entire trilogy: formally a translation, but actually the first 'poetic adaptation' ever performed in Syracuse (*Orestiad*), was written by Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-1975), and commissioned by Luciano Lucignani and Vittorio Gassman. It was a turning point towards a new age of classical reception, and started a trend which is vital and influential still nowadays.⁴

These are just some of the productions which took place at the Greek theatre, over a century, and in our vision we propose here to consider them altogether as a part of the 'genetic makeup' of this Theatre. Every drama, every theatre, every evening of performance adds itself to the list. To us, they evoke the key image of the palimpsest; the theatre, like an ancient manuscript, hosts a new performance every evening. Each time the live experience of the audience is old-and-new, as it adds itself to the previous ones. Therefore, the most perceptive among modern spectators may detect the traces of all previous performances which are still visible somehow beneath the ancient stones.

2. Gibellina, Sicily

If this is our thesis, in a wider sense the concept of palimpsest may assume to us a further meaning in special circumstances; especially after a tragic event or a trauma, it may happen that the best choice seems to recur, symbolically, to a new version of a classical play, and in particular of the *Oresteia*, in order to celebrate the re-foundation (or rebirth) of a community. This is what occurred in Gibellina, a town in the Belice Valley (on the western side of Sicily), which was totally erased by a terrible earthquake in just one night (between 14 and 15 January 1968). The few survivors had to live in barracks for years, before their town was built again. Moreover, Gibellina was never built as it was, and not even on the same spot: not on the mountain, but in the valley below, near the new E90 highway (Palermo-Mazara del Vallo). Ludovico Corrao, an influential political member of the leftist party and a senator and Mayor since 1970, made a public call to Italian and International artists. He invited them to encourage the rebirth of Gibellina live again, and to offer their personal contributions, either in the form of art pieces, workshops, or buildings on site. Among oth-

⁴ On Pasolini see Treu 2005: 35, 149-199; Fusillo 2007; Berti, 2008: 105-15; Condello 2012; Franco and Piantanida 2018: 100-119.

ers, the Sicilian artist Emilio Isgrò accepted Corrao's invitation. He was not yet a playwright at that time – he was born in 1937 in Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto on the eastern coast of Sicily, near Messina. In 1956 he moved north, where he lived in Milan and in Venice; at first he worked as a journalist, later he became a well-known visual artist, particularly for his *Cancellatura* – a technique which he invented and practiced since the Sixties. The name comes from the verb 'cancellare' ('erase'), and in a way it reminds us of ancient palimpsests. Basically, he covers a great part of a text, usually with monochromatic stripes, leaving only some key words or details uncovered: therefore, well visible, they can emerge at best from all others.⁵ At first, when he worked as a journalist for *Il Gazzettino* (Venice) Isgrò started by erasing parts of newspapers; later he turned to texts of more durable value, either poetic or symbolic (an iconic photo, an image, a map), with an official, political, social or religious status, and a special 'allure' or authority (a prayer, a constitution, a law, an encyclopedia, and so on). For instance, he 'cancelled' Melville's *Moby Dick* in his latest personal exhibition (*Emilio Isgrò*, Fondazione Cini, Venice, from 13 September to 24 November 2019).

In the Eighties, Isgrò was already famous as a visual artist, but not as a playwright. Yet, he was commissioned to write a drama by the Mayor Corrao. For the children and the people of Gibellina he wrote his first 'play', *Gibella del Martirio*: it is a sort of funeral song, a choral prayer for the dead (première on 10 January 1982: see Isgrò, 2011: 55-8, 93-114). In the following months, Isgrò also wrote and staged a processional drama for Gibellina's patron saint (*San Rocco legge la lista dei miracoli e degli orrori*) and in three years a trilogy based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*: originally it was meant to be staged in the ancient Greek theatre of Segesta, not far from the new town. However, the permission to use the archaeological site was denied, by the INDA Foundation, with a significant objection: Isgrò's adaptation was not an original Greek drama, it was somehow perceived as a 'fake', and therefore not allowed to be played in a 'true' Greek theatre.⁶ This denial some-

⁵ This technique nowadays is so widespread that it might be misused in the public domain: in a 2017, a sort of 'cancellatura' appeared on the front cover of Roger Waters' album *Is this the life we really want?*, but Isgrò's work is not cited, nor credited anywhere. The artist first asked to be acknowledged as a source of inspiration. Then he sued the record label, and won. Finally, they made an agreement.

⁶ The same author recalls the episode in his essay "Cancellazione di Eschilo" (Isgrò 2011: 586: see below, Appendix 2), where he explains his method of erasing and rewriting Aeschylus, and he adds: "Eppure io fui infinitamente grato al grande filologo e grecista Benedetto Marzullo il giorno che, parlando in pubblico della mia mancata traduzione, disse senza mezzi termini che si trattava di una restituzione perfetta di Eschilo e del suo spirito. E almeno di questo mi convinsi: che cancellare e scrivere sono esattamente la stessa cosa" ("And yet, I was immensely grateful to the great philologist and scholar Benedetto Marzullo when he, in a public speaking about my failed trans-

how betrays an attitude still strong, nowadays, among audiences and scholars, politicians and institutions: what kind of event, or performance, could 'fit' an ancient theatre at best? Is it just a matter of genre, or content, or antiquity? In other words, should only Greek dramas enter an ancient Greek theatre, and Latin plays a Roman site? If we follow such a strict rule, a Roman Amphitheatre such as the Arena in Verona should be no more a set for a rock concert as for an opera. And what should be chosen for a reconstructed theatre, such as La Fenice in Venezia? Even today, this is a relevant matter of discussion. In the Eighties, however, the prohibition regarding Segesta (the "scacco di Segesta" as Isgrò ironically called it), fatally led to the best choice ever: the trilogy was staged on the most suitable place, where it belongs, among the memories of the earthquake. The ruins of Old Gibellina (a ghost town) resembled those very walls of Troy and provided a perfect scenery for the return of King Agamemnon: "è Troia o Gibellina tutta questa rovina?" ("Are these ruins Troy, or Gibellina?").⁷

The trilogy was named *Oresteia di Gibellina* and was performed in three chapters, each following summer (1982-1984) in order to celebrate the birth of the new town. In those very years, we may remember, the *Oresteia* had a great revival worldwide: after Luca Ronconi (Belgrade, 1972), the trilogy was staged by Peter Stein (Berlin, 1980), Peter Hall (London, 1981), Karolos Koun (Epidauros, 1980-1982). Many others have followed up until now.⁸ Among these authors, Isgrò can count on a profound education in literacy and culture of 'Western Greece': in his early years, he was acquainted with Rosanna Pirandello, a relative of the great writer, and a poet herself, but also with Vincenzo Consolo and other writers; moreover, he learnt ancient Greek in Messina (see Isgrò, 2011: 160), and he worked with Michele Stylo at the Greek theatre of Tindari.⁹ While Pasolini confessed that he faced Aeschylus "as a dog does with a bone" ("Nota del traduttore", Pasolini 1960), Isgrò had the opposite approach: he 'erased' the original text in order to give birth to a new text, which has Aeschylus in the backlight (see below, Appendix 2 = Isgrò, 2011: 585-6). Like Aeschylus, he too goes West, from the eastern coast to Gibellina, and he changes his native dialect with the local ones, and creates his own, poetic language with a mixture of ex-

lation, said bluntly that it was a perfect rendering of Aeschylus and his spirit. And at least I persuaded myself of that: to erase and to write are exactly the same thing".)

⁷ The memory of Euripides' *Trojan Women* serves as an introduction, and a final question, to the first drama of Isgrò's trilogy, *Agamènnuni*: see Isgrò 2011: 220-1

⁸ See respectively lucaronconi.it, Bierl 2004, and 2012; Treu 2009: 77-84 and 2018: 100-19. Sidiropoulou 2018.

⁹ See Isgrò 2017: 24-6. In 1956, he cooperates with the director Michele Stylo in the re-opening of the Greek theatre in Tindari (Sophocles' *Ajax*): see also Isgrò, 2017: 33-4 and 2011:13; Treu 2017a.

otic terms, including Spanish and French (whose domination marked his hometown, for instance), American English (the Allies disembarked here in WW2), and many other visitors and foreign people who crossed the Mediterranean sea over centuries of navigation and foreign domination; he invents musical verses with rhymes, sounds and rhythmic effects.¹⁰

3. Isgrò's Palimpsest

The key concept of Isgrò's artworks, well visible in the whole trilogy as in his visual poetry, is the 'cancellatura' as a dialectic confrontation of past and present, myth and reality. He transfers the original setting of the Trojan war into Gibellina's ruins: the performance takes place "sulle macerie



Emilio Isgrò, *Agamènnuni* 1983. Photo: Federico Allotta.

di Gibellina". Right there another artist, Alberto Burri, would create his artwork years later. He would cover the whole hill with his Cretto, a

¹⁰ Isgrò constantly worked, during rehearsals, with the crew on stage. He kept adjusting the text, in order to fit different needs or requests, regarding the chorus and the musicians, the people of Gibellina and the professional actors who came from different parts of Italy: Francesca Benedetti (the main actress in *Gibella del Martirio* and in *Oresteia*, as Tinestra) from Marche (on the Northeastern coast), Mariano Rigillo (Orestes) from Naples, Anna Nogara (Electra) from Milan: see below, Appendix 1.

white, concrete, funeral sheet over the dead town.¹¹ On the same hill, between the ruins, Isgrò imagined and developed his own trilogy, in verses, whose plot he literally built on the ruins of the *Oresteia*. He called in as many people as he could: his title *Oresteia di Gibellina* in Italian has a double meaning. It meant not only that it took place there, in that place, but also that the trilogy was made, created and owned by the people of Gibellina. The collective performance involved the entire community. Many citizens took part in each production, working as carpenters or musicians, making costumes and scenes, playing minor roles and the chorus as in ancient Athens (see Isgrò, 2011: 20-1 and 546-8, and 2017: 161-2). They invited another artist, the sculptor Arnaldo Pomodoro: he



Emilio Isgrò, *Agamènnuni* 1983. Photo: Federico Allotta.

created geometrical, metallic shells, similar to space ships, and carried them on stage by extras; once opened, they revealed the main actors inside. The director Filippo Crivelli is an expert in opera and mu-

¹¹ Some of Burri's projects for Gibellina were shown at MAG - Riva del Garda (22 June 2019 – 3 November 2019: museoaltogarda.it). Other works are on permanent exhibition at Burri Foundation in his hometown, Città di Castello (fondazioneburri.org: Accessed 6 September 2019).

sic theatre, dealing perfectly well with choral songs and mass movements,¹² but the real engine which generated all action was Isgrò's script.



Emilio Isgrò, *Coefuri* 1984. Photo: Federico Allotta.

If we take a closer look on text, first of all, we may find a meta-theatrical prologue which introduces the ancient trilogy and connects it to modern times. Here, Aeschylus and the Greek heritage of Sicily are evoked with an ironical, tragicomic touch, typical of Isgrò's poetics. Also, some new, symbolic characters are added: a Cantastorie/storyteller (defined by Isgrò as "multiplicabile in più figure", i.e. a "multiple character", as he actually changes his role in the performance);¹³ the archpriest Ingòglia, a religious head and influential member of Gibellina's community in the past, here reinvented by Isgrò as a chorus leader and narrator. Aeschylus' char-

¹² Filippo Crivelli (born in 1929, and still active today) started his career with Luchino Visconti and has been directing hundreds of works – especially operas, musical dramas and similar genres – among others, at La Scala, Gerolamo, and Piccolo Theatres of Milan).

¹³ A similar role was played by the Aoidos ('Singer'), a new character which the director Marco Baliani added to the original text in INDA production of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* (Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2017): see Ugolini, 2017: 168: "In the prologue and epilogue, he introduced himself as the theatre's 'caretaker', as a sort of *genius loci* who informed the audience about the antecedents of the Labdacides' myth and exhorted them to preserve the memory of the events sculpted in the site's ancient stones".

acters too are changed: the Watchman of *Agamemnon* is substituted by an anonymous Carrettiere ('Carter'). As soon as he enters, we are told that he fell from his cart, he fainted and he woke up 'mysteriously' speaking ancient Greek. So the time-lapse is overcome and the audience is suddenly transported to Aeschylus' times. In the course of action, he will reveal himself as Orestes. It is worth translating the crucial words of the prologue:

CARRETTIERE Zotta in Sicilia significa frusta.

Ed è con questa frusta che si chiama zotta
che pungo la cavalla quando annotta
su Madonie, Peloritani e Nèbrodi.

CANTASTORIE La storia è presto detta.

Un caso da manuale,
studiato anche
dall'eccellente e grande
filologo e grecista Milio,
eccezionale docente
all'Università di Messina:
il carrettiere cade in una frana
per colpa di una cavalla strana
e quando si risveglia all'ospedale
– il meschino analfabeta –
ti parla greco ch'è un piacere udirlo.

CARRETTIERE *En archè!... en archè!... en archè!*¹⁴

Mischinazzu!... analfabeta!... policlinicu!...
Greco o sicano?

...

CANTASTORIE Troia combatte ancora...

En archè c'era un bambino che si chiama Dio...
*Theòs Theò Theò Theò Theòs...*¹⁵

CARRETTIERE (*si prende la testa tra le mani*)

Sono duemila e rotti – duemila e rotti, dico –,
duemila quattrocento quarant'anni
che veglio tutte le notti
sulla casa d'Atreo e dei nipoti...¹⁶

¹⁴ The Greek term *archè* clearly echoes ancient cosmologies, but also the Bible, more familiar to modern audiences (see the *Gospel of John*, 1:1). With this formula, Isgrò introduces the mixture of classical and Christian themes which is typical of his art and poetics.

¹⁵ The declension of the Greek term *theòs* ('God') evokes school memories, but it is ironically ascribed to an illiterate who suddenly and 'mysteriously' speaks ancient Greek, without knowing it, so that his words sound like a litany, or mantra.

¹⁶ The initial 'mantra' counts the number of years between the first staging of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in Athens (458 BCE) and the actual date of performance of Isgrò's *Agamènnuni* (1983): first in Italian, then in Sicilian. Later in the *parodos* (see the follow-

Scàmpami, Dìu, pietà di stu castigu!
 Havi dumila e rutti
 – dumila quattrucèntu quarànt'anni –
 chi stàju vigghiànti
 supr' 'a casa d'Atrèu, mpujàtu
 supra i gùvita, comu un dog,
 ch'all'Austràlia veni a diri cani
 e in doichlandisi si pronùnzia Hund,
 riciatànnu supra all'acca.
 E sàcciu i spustamenti di' stiddi nuttatori,
 lu nvernu chi pòrtanu e la stati,
 e quànnu spùntanu
 e quànnu còddanu, sti magnìfichi regini,
 ciammiànti celu celu.
 Vardu si vidu di luntanu lampiàri un focu
 e siddu chiàmanu di Tròja
 'n signu di vittòria: cà chistu spera, e voli,
 'u cori masculinu di 'na fimmina.
 'U sonnu è lèggiu e sònaira non fazzu
 ntrà stu pagghiunèddu 'spostu ò sirinu.
 Scantu mi teni, cchiù chi la sunnura,
 scantu di calari i pàppibri ntò sonnu.
 Cantu, friscu pi non dòrmiri,
 ma non c'è ninna chi prima o doppu
 non si fa chiàntu supra sta famigghia
 chi pirdivu ogni sensu di giustizia.
 Miràculu saria e gràzia
 si scuru scuru bampiassi 'u focu
 chi mi libira di sta cruci.

...

INGÒGLIA Havi dumila quattrucèntu quarànt'anni
 chi tutti i nostri navi, cchiù di milli,
 curreu a vinnicàrisi di Priamu
 Èranu vuturri orbi di dulari
 chi ci ròbanu i quagghiarèddi
 e firrianu supra i nidi
 rimijànnu cu' l'ali:
 chì non valia la pena
 d'addivàrili pi nenti a ddi figghitti.
 E Dòminu Onniputenti che l'òspiti cunsola
 i figghi d'Atrèu nfürgica contr'a Pàridi:
 e pi 'na svirgugnata
 chi s' 'a passaru tutti
 si spèzzanu i catini 'u coddu e i vrazza

ing verses) it is repeated by the Archpriest Ingòglia (i.e. the chorus leader).

e masticanu purvirazzu
 greci e trojàni nsèmmula
 tra lanzi rutti e spati e scuti e lutti.
 Troppu anziàni èramu
 quànnu scuppiàvu ‘a guèrra, bummi e tirrimotu.
 E nni lassaru a’ casa, supra ‘na putruna,
 minni mpassuluti, nutrichi mpujàti ê vastuna:
 chì su’ muddacchi carusitti e vecchi
 e senza nerbu.
 Chistu, chistu è un vicchiarèddu
 quànnu mòrunu i fogghi:
 picciriddu ch’arranca cu’ tri pedi,
 trimuliànti, jàncu,
 sonnu nsunnatu a menzujòrnu.
 Chi succidiu, regina Clitennestra?
 Chi su’ sti lumi e tutti sti gran ciùri?
 Chi è stu ciàuru ‘i carni supra d’‘a tarigghia?
 Sta mùsica divina chi nesci di lu bàgghiu¹⁷
 e trasi ntò curtigghiu?
 Sogno sognato a menzujòrnu.

[CARTER *Zotta* in Sicily means ‘whip’/ And with this whip that is called *zotta*/ I sting the mare when night comes/ On Madonie, Peloritani and Nébroidi mountains.

STORYTELLER The story is soon told, a textbook case, studied also by / the excellent and great/ philologist and Greek scholar Milio/ exceptional professor /at the University of Messina / the carter falls into a landslide / for a strange mare / and when he wakes up/ he speaks Greek / a poor illiterate as he is / so that it’s a pleasure to hear.

CARTER ‘In the beginning’!... ‘In the beginning’!... ‘In the beginning’! Poor me!... illiterate!... Polyclinic!...Grecanic? Or Sican?

...

STORYTELLER Troy is still fighting / In the beginning there was a child called God /“God, of God, to God, God...

CARTER (*taking his head within his hands*) Two thousand years and change/ I say, two thousand and change / two thousand four hundred and forty years / have I been watching every night /over the house of Atreus and his grandsons/¹⁸ (*in Sicilian*) Save me, God, from this torment, God, have mercy! Two thousand years and change/ I say, two thousand and change / two thousand four hundred and forty years / have I been watching every night / over the house of Atreus / on my elbows, like a dog¹⁹ which is the term for

¹⁷ The ‘baglio’ is the typical courtyard of Sicilian houses.

¹⁸ The first sentences are uttered in Italian, the following ones in Sicilian.

¹⁹ Isgrò uses the English term ‘Dog’ then the German ‘Hund’, in order to recall the influence of foreign languages in mass migrations of yesterday (from Sicily and South-

dog in Australia / and in Germany is pronounced Hund / with aspirated 'h' / I know the movements of night stars / when they bring winter and summer / when they rise and set / these magnificent queens / flaming in the sky / I watch to see far away a fire flashes / and whether they call from Troy / in order to announce victory: because this is what is hoping, and wanting / the male heart of a woman. The sleep is light and I dream nothing more / on this straw bed exposed to dew / Fear prevents me, more than sleep / fear of falling asleep / I sing, I whistle to avoid sleeping / but there is no song which sooner or later / will not turn into weep for this family / who lost every sense of justice. / it would be a miracle and a grace / if in this darkness a fire could blaze / able to free me from this cross.

CHORUS Two thousands four hundred and forty years / have passed since all our ships, more than a thousand/ run to seek revenge on Priamus / they were vultures, blind in pain / deprived of their offspring/ and they turn over the nests / flapping their wings / because it was not worth at all / raising their children / and God Almighty who relieves hosts / instigates the sons of Atreus against Paris / and for a shameless woman / who gave herself to everybody / chains of neck and arms are broken / and they eat dirt / Greeks and Trojans together / among broken spears, swords, and shields and losses. / Too old were we / when the war exploded, bombs and earthquake. / And we were left home, on an armchair, / whitered breasts, toddlers leaning on sticks / because they are mushy, little children and elders/ and spineless / This, this is an old man / when leaves die: / a little one trudging through on three feet / flickering, white / dream dreamt at midnight / What happened, Queen Clytemnestra? / What are these lights and these magnificent flowers? / What is this smell of meat over the grill? / This divine music coming from the *baglio* and entering the courtyard? Dream dreamt at midday.]

The prologue and *parodos* of *Agamemnon* offer a significant example of Isgrò's work: the Carter substitutes the Watchman, but he is also a prefiguration of Orestes, and of the author too. Not by chance, he enters the scene by translating a Sicilian term ("zotta / frusta", i.e. "whip") and he speaks ancient Greek, by accident (so we are told by the storyteller, either "single or multiplied", as Isgrò specifically adds to his name: Isgrò 2011: 40, 160). The Carter, actually, speaks all languages, including words of his own creation and post-colonial slangs, typical of immigrants, mostly derived from English and German. A similar technique, all over the text, aims at rendering Aeschylus' linguistic and stylistic variations, in dialogues and in choral parts, and at reflecting the complex personalities of many different characters, partly derived from Aeschylus, partly recreated by Isgrò.

Pilades for instance, according to his role and foreign status, regular-

ern Italy to USA, Australia, Germany and Northern Europe), and of today (Sicily is often a stopover from Southern and Eastern Mediterranean towards Northern Europe). This technique will be reprised, and amplified, in the whole trilogy.

ly speaks Italian, and uses Sicilian just to make himself clear to other characters. The chorus members too have a special language, especially when they sing, as it happens in Aeschylus and in Greek tragedy. Moreover, Isgrò sometimes divides the choral parts among other characters, and has them repeated in Italian and in Sicilian, or vice versa (for instance in scene 4, the archpriest Ingòglia and the Carter). Also, many key concepts are repeated as *Leitmotiven*, and enlivened by music, often inspired by Sicilian folk songs. The performance, as said before, largely counted on community members, including musicians and singers. However, Isgrò is very far from the stereotypes of Sicily. His focus is the quest for the unique value of words: for instance in his *Oresteia* he replicates from Aeschylus the frequency of puns and jokes, alliterations, onomatopoeias, speaking names, compounds, epithets (the Greek ἀνδρολέτειρα, said of Helen, becomes “Elina stutamasculi”, ‘Helen, the woman who switches men off’). Some of these words are rare, uncommon, archaic, just as Aeschylus’ words should have appeared to many spectators in fifth-century Athens: we have a hint of it in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, performed in 405 BCE (about 50 years after the première of *Oresteia*). The same Aristophanic comedy offers a good term of comparison with its poetic *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides, who challenge each other in a duel of verses.

Ancient playwrights, actually, were used to confront their predecessors, and to transform stories, plots, myths and plays in a collective process of adaptation and re-writing. For instance, both Euripides and Sophocles wrote a play entitled *Electra*, challenging Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers*. Latin playwrights too, in turn, adapted the Greek plays in their own, infinite variations. In a way, Isgrò adopts a similar process by rewriting ancient dramas in his own personal style, updating them, in order to fit a modern audience, without simplifying them. On the contrary, he opens them to wider dimensions, which may include and summarize previous versions and interpretations. According to his complex artistic vision, he aims at bringing back to life ancient archetypes, at creating new, symbolic connections between words, themes, objects, and characters.

Therefore, for instance, the original chorus and characters may change their nature, or melt in a new one, as well as a single character may split into two or more. Men and women may borrow their expressions and movements from animals, and metaphorical sentences may gain a concrete shape, on stage. Also, mythological figures and motives which are less known to a modern public may take advantage of parallels with images of saints and Catholic rites. Besides erasing and rewriting, he focuses sometimes on small details of larger images, on punctuation marks (such as a comma, or a full stop) which are enlarged a thousand times, in order to cover the whole space. As a visual artist, too, he experimented a simi-

lar technique (the so-called “particolare ingrandito” i.e. “enlarged detail”) throughout his whole career.

Another distinctive aspect of Isgrò’s poetics and sense of humour is well visible in the characters’ descriptions, in the long and often ironical comments he adds after the dialogues, and in his forewords before some crucial scenes. His first aim is to enlighten the text, so he frequently anticipates, or explains, what the audience is about to witness (or is actually watching): he clarifies the location and setting, the actions and words of major and minor characters, he comments on their reactions, and sometimes confronts them with modern equivalents. Another peculiar feature he shares with his Greek model is his passion for proverbs, popular idioms, folk expressions and metaphors (especially regarding the areas of family, motherhood, feelings of love, and friendship), which in his words appear at the same time archaic and modern.

In this perspective, Isgrò’s artistic creations are a palimpsest in an archaeological, historical, and anthropological sense: he starts from an ancient text, he ‘erases’ or covers a part of it, and lets other parts emerge; above all, he undercovers striking analogies, similarities with modern context, religion, habits, and mentality – especially of Sicily and Southern Italy (in his poetic view, “Il Grande Meridione”), between WW2 and the Cold War. This is the chronological arch of the trilogy, and particularly the setting of the third drama, *Villa Eumènidì*: Orestes’ vision of Erinyes in the final scene of *Libation Bearers* inspires a change of setting. The drama is ideally transferred from Gibellina’s ruin to a real historical place, which is part of Isgrò’s memory: the mental hospital of Barcellona Pozzo di Gotto (Isgrò’s native town, in Sicily) is the perfect set and symbol of the post-war Italy and in Cold War Europe, divided by the Yalta conference: in the course of the play, in Isgrò’s words, the set will become “a universal Purgatory, a Parliament, a Church, a court of law”, scattered with benches which seem “coffins after a disaster” (with a direct reference with Gibellina’s earthquake). In this adaptation, Pilades is the director of the mental hospital and Orestes’ visions become a collective nightmare, which involves him, all other characters and the entire community of Gibellina. Among them, a multitude of symbolic figures, ancient and modern, real and mythical, functions as the Erynies, the demonic chorus of the original text: Fifty mothers, Italian Generals, Soviet sailors, policemen, Rose the Nun (‘Rosa la Monaca’), Pilades, and Iphigenia (who evokes, in Isgrò, both Cassandra and Electra). The finale, according to Isgrò’s poetics, could not be an optimistic happy ending, but is an ironical, cyclic, eternal return to the original status quo, to the Royal Family and the *ménage à trois*. Ideally, Isgrò brings the audience back to the prologos of *Agamemnon*, where it all started: Pilades, now married to

Clytemnestra, becomes king with the name of Agamemnon I; the Queen puts to death everyone except Aegisthus (opportunist as always, he denies everything, in order to save his life). Orestes turns into the Carter and leaves again.

4. Isgrò's Legacy

Since the Eighties, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* has been more and more played and adapted, on Italian and international scenes.²⁰ Isgrò's trilogy has been recognized among the first and most important adaptations, and finally republished in the first critical edition of Isgrò's complete theatre with a selection of essays (Isgrò 2011).

In the past decades, Isgrò has been working as an artist and a writer, frequently intertwining modern and classical models, with poetic creativity and freedom. He wrote, among other plays, a Sicilian *Medea* based in Messina, a free adaptation on Euripides' play committed by the local public theatre (2002). Again, as in his *Oresteia*, the history of the city (which suffered a Spanish domination), inspired him to create a new version of the myth: Iason and the Argonauts are compared to the Spanish Conquistadores, while Medea, the foreign sorceress from Colchis, becomes "Principessa Maya, o Azteca, comunque barbara" ("A Maya or Aztecan, anyway barbarian, Princess"). Homer's *Odyssey*, too, is another archetype which recurs in Isgrò and in other Sicilian artists with significant frequency. Among Isgrò's works, we may cite the novel *Polifemo* (1989), his epos *Odissea cancellata* (2003), the most recent poem *La Pelle scorticata* (2016) inspired by the historical exile of Curzio Malaparte on the Sicilian island of Lipari.²¹ In

²⁰ For a list of productions, see the online Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama at Oxford University (APGRD) and the bibliography on their website (APGRD.ox.uk). Among major editions, we may cite here the trilogy translated by Emanuele Severino and directed by Franco Parenti, at Pier Lombardo Theatre, Milano, 1985 (see Bierl, 2004: 123-7), *Les Atrides* directed by Ariane Mnouchkine (Cartoucherie de Vincennes, Paris, 1990), the reprise of Peter Stein's trilogy in Moscow (1994), *Oresteia. (una commedia organica?)* directed by Romeo Castellucci (Societas Raffaello Sanzio, 1995/1996), reprised in 2016 at Argentina Theatre, Rome see Bierl 2004; Treu, 2005; Ferraresi and Marino, 2016. At the Greek theatre of Syracuse there were several performances (for instance in 2001/2003, 2008, 2014: see indafondazione.org). In 2018, the free adaptation of the entire trilogy by Anagoor premiered at the Venice Biennale. In May 2019, another one by Milo Rau (*Orestes in Mosul*) premiered at the Royal Dutch Theatre in Gent (NL). See Giovannelli 2019.

²¹ See Cammarosano, 2004 and 2009. About Isgrò's *Medea* see Condello and Rodighiero (eds) (2015): 263-76; about *Odissea cancellata* see Ieranò and Taravacci (eds) (2018): 279-305, and Matelli (ed.), (2017): 83-93. About *La pelle scorticata* (première at Metastasio Theatre, Prato, on 17 may 2014, reprise at M77 Gallery, Milan, 6 October - 3

all these texts, as in his *Oresteia*, Isgrò goes far beyond the typical paradox of translators: formally, he betrays the model, but ideally he is faithful in spirit. His adherence to ancient texts is in the overview, rather than in details. Other authors may seem more faithful to the text, at least in their intentions, but often do not engage deeply with it: in doing so, as Isgrò believes, they do not help the audience understand it completely, or they obscure it. On the contrary, the artist is committed to letting most spectators understand or at least grasp the fundamental aspects of ancient dramas, which are often not known now as they were before. Therefore the text may be integrated or modified with modern events, names, and places which may function as 'equivalent' to ancient ones.

The 'erase and re-write' technique is not only essential to Isgrò's work, both as a visual artist and a dramatist, but it is tightly connected to the peculiar combination of destruction and reconstruction, which is the most recurrent and distinctive feature of Sicilian history, and theatre. The island has always been, and still is, a crossroad and a melting pot of cultures and languages (Greeks, Phoenicians, Arabs, Normands, Spanish, French). Conquerors, travellers, and immigrants, in the past centuries and decades, have followed Aeschylus' path. To them, Sicily appeared as a promised land. Still today, the Greek heritage is strongly visible all over the island, particularly in those theatres, sites, and monuments where tragedies are staged, while the nearby coasts give shelter to thousands of people landing from the sea.

In this regard, Isgrò's example is followed by other artists who adapt and stage not only Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, but other tragedies (such as *Suppliant Women*) and texts (primarily adaptations of Homer's *Odyssey*) in order to reflect dramatic events, mostly connected to the mass movements which inseaundate and submerge Sicily. While more and more tragedies are staged, the nearby coasts give shelter to thousands of people landing from the sea. Among the best examples, an adaptation of Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* by Vacis and Pirrotta in Southern Sicily (*Supplici a Portopalo*, 2009: see Rimini 2015: 146; Pedersoli 2010) and another one at the ancient theatre of Syracuse, based on an Italian translation, but with inserts in Sicilian, and modern Greek, directed by Moni Ovadia (2014). Nowadays, the 'Odyssey' of the refugees does not stop, unfortunately, but it keeps inspiring artists – all over Sicily – who ideally follow Isgrò's legacy by working on similar themes, and using their dialect as a new universal language. Among them, we may cite: Lina Prosa, with her *Trilogia di un Naufragio* ('Trilogy of a Shipwreck'), Emma Dante, Mimmo Cuticchio, who innovated the traditional Opera dei Pupi (the typical Sicilian Puppet theatre) and wrote new plays (some of them are inspired by Homer's *Iliad* and

Odyssey), and the choreographer Roberto Zappalà (Catania), with his work in progress *Re-mapping Sicily*.²²

This common thread, the migration theme and the ‘Odyssey’ of the refugees, inspires many festivals and events and many recent performances and lectures all over Sicily: it is the main focus of two classical seasons which occurred at the same time, in summer 2017, in two ancient Greek theatres – Tindari and Syracuse (see respectively Treu, 2017a; Ugolini, 2017). Another example is the “itinerant Festival” named ‘Sabir’ which has no fixed place, but keeps travelling around the Mediterranean Sea (festivalsabir.it). Since 2014, it has been hosted, each year, in a different port or city: so far, it took place respectively in Lampedusa (2014), Pozzallo (2015), Syracuse (2017), Palermo (Cantieri La Zisa, 2018), Lecce (2019).

As for the Festival ‘Orestiadi di Gibellina’, named after Isgrò’s trilogy, it is still hosting a museum, events, exhibitions, poetic and theatre performances. Among them, it is worth remembering, for the continuity with Isgrò’s trilogy, two productions: in 1988, a celebrated version in ancient Greek of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* directed by Thierry Salmon (1988) with splendid cabissosomal songs by the great composer Giovanna Marini;²³ in 1990, the Italian première of *La Sposa di Messina*, the original drama dedicated by Friedrich Schiller to the programmatic re-creation of ancient Greek tragedy (Teatro dei Ruderi, 1-9 September 1990: see [fondazioneorestiadi.it /archivi/1990](http://fondazioneorestiadi.it/archivi/1990)).²⁴ This production casted a huge chorus and outstanding actors (among them, Lucilla Morlacchi, and Massimo Popolizio) and was directed by Elio de Capitani, artistic director of TeatrIdithalia (Milan): he worked on the Italian translation, by Claudio Groff, and asked Franco Scaldati, a late Sicilian poet (1943-2013), to write new choral songs (in Sicilian verses), as a personal version of the original chorus, in a way comparable to Isgrò’s verses. Also, the music was written by Giovanna Marini, the

²² It includes *Naufregio con spettatore* (2010), whose title echoes Hans Blumenberg’s *Shipwreck with Spectator*, and *Odisseo: il naufragio dell’accoglienza* (2011). See Zappalà 2011 and Auteri 2018. The latest choreography by Zappalà, *La Giara*, freely inspired by Luigi Pirandello, premiered on 12-22 June 2019 at Regio Theatre, Turin: <https://www.scenariopubblico.com/en/compagnia-zappala-danza/creazioni-czd/>. Accessed 6 September, 2019).

²³ Salmon’s legacy, and Marini’s music, are now reprised in an adaptation of *Trojan Women* by the choreographer Claudio Bernardo, as part of his work in progress *As Palavras / Frontiera* (première at Rovereto, 3 September 2019: orienteoccidente.it. Accessed 27 September, 2019).

²⁴ On Schiller’s text see Zimmermann 2011; Halliwell and Avezzù 2015 (the original foreword translated from German into English, with notes and comments on the chorus, particularly the first choral song). On the 1990 production, see Schiller 1990 and De Capitani’s biography (<http://old.elfo.org/storia/bioelio.html>). On Scaldati, see Marino 2013; Valentini 1997 and 2019.

same composer who had worked with Salmon, and a monumental scene was committed to the artist Mimmo Paladino: his huge sculpture ("Montagna di sale", a mountain of white salt, dotted with big black horses, halfway buried) is still visible in the courtyard of Baglio di Stefano, the actual site of the Orestyadi di Gibellina festival and Museum. It is also worth mentioning a brand new trilogy, freely inspired by Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, produced and staged at Gibellina in 2004. Each drama was directed by a different artist: *Agamemnon* by the Argentinian director Rodrigo Garcia, *Libation Bearers* by Monica Conti, and *Eumenidi* (a Sicilian adaptation of Pasolini's translation) by Vincenzo Pirrotta (see Treu, 2005: 199-201, 300-301, Treu 2008: 321).

In 2019, the 'Orestyadi Festival' took place, in July and August, in Baglio di Stefano (Gibellina). As for Syracuse, since May 2019, the INDA Foundation hosted an exhibition on the 'Orestyadi Festival' (in Palazzo Greco, Syracuse) with objects, *maquettes* and scenes from many productions, including Isgrò's trilogy and those cited above (1988 /1990). This city is an ideal location for the exhibition, for its special connection to Gibellina and to our themes. First of all, as we noticed in the foreword, since 1914 Syracuse has been celebrating its special moments with *Oresteia*. Moreover, in the past years, the mass migrations across the Mediterranean Sea have deeply touched the city: while many thousands of people were landing on the shores, at a short distance, the Greek theatre hosted dramas, ancient and modern, mostly dealing with actual issues (civil rights, the status of citizens, foreigners, guests, and the impact of mass migrations on local communities), such as Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, *Seven Against Thebes*, Euripides' *Medea* or *Phoenician Women*. Also, on 17th June 2019, for the first time the ancient Greek theatre hosted a new play, *L'abisso*; it is written, played and directed by Davide Enia (another Sicilian writer, playwright, actor, and director who follows, ideally, Isgrò's legacy). It is based on his novel *Appunti per un naufragio* (Enia 2017; Treu 2019): a sort of autobiographical diary, freely inspired by Homer's *Odyssey* in content, but related to Greek tragedy as a genre in style and tone. Before and after Enia's performance, the same Greek theatre hosted two tragedies by Euripides (*Helen* and *Trojan Women*) on alternate nights, and later Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, as well as other events in the Greek theatre and in the surrounding area (Orecchio di Dioniso and Latomie caves): one of them was the International Refugee Day, which has been celebrated in Syracuse for the past 17 years, with performances and lectures of ancient and modern texts with a common focus on migration.

Regarding these themes, and the 'erase-rewrite' process, it is worth citing as a conclusion two recent episodes which occurred in the performances respectively of *Helen* and *Lysistrata*, at the Greek theatre of Syracuse, in

summer 2019. They are both connected to our focus, and to Isgrò's legacy: they are not mere 'interpolations' of ancient texts, and they may be read in the backlight of Isgrò's poetics, as an artistic choice. Not by chance, they are also related to ethical and political themes such as the current Italian laws and the government restrictions regarding rescues of shipwrecks and refugees. The former case is in the dialogue between Menelaus and the old doorkeeper who tries to ban him (*Helen*, 447-50). Walter Lapini, the Italian scholar who translated *Helen* for the stage, wrote some interesting notes about his work, and a *personal* feedback on the show.²⁵ Actually, the Italian translation by Lapini was: "Ma io sono un naufrago, un naufrago è sacro! – Rivolgiti a qualcun altro e lascia in pace noi." ("But I am a castaway, and a castaway is sacred" – Go and talk to someone else, leave us alone!": Euripide, *Elena*, *Numero Unico*, Syracuse, Fondazione INDA, 2019, p. 98). The final text brought on stage was: "The castaway is sacred", the doorkeeper answers "Our ports are closed" ("Un Naufrago è sacro. Qui da noi i porti sono chiusi"). According to Lapini, the theatre company changed the dialogue as a reaction to the restrictive politics on immigration in Italy: in the very days of performances, the ship Seawatch 3 was denied to enter the closed port of Lampedusa (notoriously, this island between Sicily and North Africa is a front-line destination in migration routes). The ship captain, Carola Rackete, forced the closure in order to disembark the refugees on board. She was arrested, prosecuted, and subjected to a media campaign, but finally released with no charges.

While these facts were dominating the newspapers, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* opened at the Greek theatre of Syracuse (28 June 2019). Again, as in *Helen*, the original text was modified: the programmatic speech uttered by Lysistrata on 'mixing' in the city metics and foreigners (Aristofane, *Lysistrata*, *Numero Unico*, Syracuse: Fondazione Inda, 2019, p. 133) on stage includes an additional line: "those desperate ones too, who come from the sea". In both productions, *Helen* and *Lysistrata*, the directors and the theatre company made a choice, which ideally recalls Isgrò's legacy, and the audience reacted with a spontaneous applause.²⁶

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²⁶ I witnessed it respectively on 22 June 2019 and on 28 June 2019.

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Appendix 1: List of Performances

L'Orestea di Gibellina

Gibellina, 1983, 1984, 1985.

I. 1983

L'Orestea di Gibellina – Agamènnuni

Ruins of Gibellina, 3, 4, 5 June 1983.

Director: Filippo Crivelli.

Stage scenery: Arnaldo Pomodoro.

Incidental music: Francesco Pennisi, Orchestra Ente Autonomo Teatro Massimo, Palermo.

Cast: Rosa Balistreri, Francesca Benedetti, Roberto Bisacco, Cornelia Grindatto, Gioacchino Maniscalco, Leonardo Marino, Loredana Martinez, Mimmo Messina, Anna Nogara, Luigi Pistilli, Marcello Perracchio, Mariano Rigillo; the people of Gibellina.

II. 1984 (on alternate nights: *Agamènnuni* and *I Cuèfuri*).

L'Orestea di Gibellina – Agamènnuni,

Ruins of Gibellina, 21, 23 June.

L'Orestea di Gibellina – I Cuèfuri

Ruins of Gibellina, 20, 22, 24 June.

III. 1985 (on alternate nights: *Agamènnuni*, *I Cuèfuri*, *Villa Eumènidì*).

L'Orestea di Gibellina – Agamènnuni

Ruins of Gibellina, 9, 12 July.

L'Orestea di Gibellina – I Cuèfuri

Ruini di Gibellina, 10, 13 July.

L'Orestea di Gibellina – Villa Eumènidì

Ruins of Gibellina, 7, 11, 14 July.

Appendix 2: Cancellazione di Eschilo (Isgrò 2011: 585-6.)

Spero di essere capito se dico subito, in questa sede, che con voi, egregi traduttori, mi sento leggermente fuori posto, se non proprio a disagio. E questo per la semplicissima ragione che questa è la testimonianza di un tale – il sottoscritto, per l'appunto – che ha fatto di tutto non per tradurre Eschilo, ma piuttosto per non tradurlo.

Quando infatti affrontai *L'Orestea di Gibellina* – che dal testo eschileo partiva – compresi immediatamente che una traduzione di sapore «siracusano», filologicamente impeccabile ma drammaturgicamente inerte, era la soluzione meno raccomandabile per una città di contadini e per una Sicilia terremotata che della filologia, in quel momento, non sapeva che farsene. Così, programmaticamente, decisi di affondare l'opera del tragediografo greco, anzi di cancellarla, se posso adottare un verbo che appartiene alla mia storia di artista e di scrittore.

La mia prima scelta, accingendomi a tale impresa, fu proprio quella di cambiare strumento linguistico e registro. Non l'italiano aurato e liberty di Ettore Romagnoli, né tanto meno i soliti, prevedibili aggiornamenti lessicali e altri accorgimenti di questo tipo.

Cercai di immaginarmi, piuttosto, una situazione drammaturgica completamente nuova, fingendo, ad esempio, che un Carrettiere – in viaggio nella notte siciliana – a un certo punto cade dal carretto per un balzo della giumenta e, al risveglio in ospedale, comincia a parlare greco. Ma è davvero greco? O non è piuttosto un greco che a poco a poco trascorre nel dialetto siciliano? Ma è davvero siciliano o non è semmai la lingua di Federico di Svevia al germinare della nostra letteratura e della nostra storia?

Così, di dubbio in dubbio (e si sa che noi siciliani siamo maestri di dubbi e di sospetti), la mia *Orestea* è diventata di fatto un'opera che traeva la maggior forza sì dal modello originale, ma ricavandosi in qualche modo uno spazio autonomo che la democratica Atene non poteva prevedere, ma del quale la Sicilia contemporanea, a volte troppo magniloquente e gonfia di retorica, aveva sicuramente bisogno.

Ricordo che la prima intenzione era quella di rappresentare il testo a Segesta, luogo greco per eccellenza come si sa. Senonché il presidente dell'INDA (il professor Giusto Monaco, Dio l'abbia in gloria) oppose da fine grecista che sarebbe stata una profanazione. E fu una vera fortuna: perché proprio allora, davanti a quel rifiuto così netto e motivato, pensai seduta stante di spostare l'operazione sulle macerie della città distrutta dal terremoto (terremotando il testo che avevo già scritto e porzionandolo al nuovo spazio che mi si apriva).

“È Troia o Gibellina tutta questa rovina?” diceva un verso della mia riscrittura. “È Eschilo o la sua irrimediabile cancellazione?” mi sarei domandato in seguito.

Certo, Eschilo si era sempre più assottigliato nella mia *Orestea*, fino a scomparire completamente in *Villa Eumènidì*, l'ultima parte della trilogia da me rifatta a misura della Sicilia e dei siciliani in un momento delicatissimo della loro storia.

Eppure io fui infinitamente grato al grande filologo e grecista Benedetto Marzullo il giorno che, parlando in pubblico della mia mancata traduzione, disse senza mezzi termini che si trattava di una restituzione perfetta di Eschilo e del suo spirito. E almeno di questo mi convinsi: che cancellare e scrivere sono esattamente la stessa cosa.

[I hope you understand me if I say immediately, here, that with you, egregious translators, I feel slightly out of place, if not uncomfortable. The reason is very simple: it is the testimony of someone – the undersigned, precisely – who did everything he could, not in order to translate Aeschylus, but rather not to translate it.

When I approached the *Oresteia di Gibellina* – whose origin was Aeschylus' text – I immediately understood that a translation with a 'Syracusan' taste, philologically impeccable, but dramaturgically inert, was the least recommended for a city of peasants and a Sicily devastated by an earthquake which in that moment did not know what to do with philology. So, programmatically, I decided to sink the work of the Greek playwright, or rather to erase it, if I can use a verb which belongs to my story of artist and writer.

My first choice, starting this venture, was to change the linguistic tool and register: not Ettore Romagnoli's golden and liberty Italian, not even the usual, predictable lexical updates and similar devices.

I rather tried to imagine a brand new dramaturgical situation, by pretending, for instance, that a Carter – travelling in the Sicilian night – at some point falls from his cart for a jump of his mare, and when he awakes in hospital he starts speaking Greek. But is it really Greek? Or rather a Greek which bit by bit becomes Sicilian dialect? But is it really Sicilian, or rather the language of Frederick of Sicily, at the beginning of our literature, and of our history?

So, from doubt to doubt (and we Sicilians, as it is well known, are Masters of doubts and suspects) my *Oresteia* became a work that took the majority of its strength from its original model, and yet gained an autonomous space which the democratic Athens could not foresee, but which contemporary Sicily, sometimes too grandiloquent and swollen with rhetoric, desperately needed.

I remember that the first intention was to perform the text in Segesta, a Greek place par excellence, as it is well known. But the President of Inda Foundation (professor Giusto Monaco, God bless him), as a fine Greek scholar, opposed: it would be a profanation. This was a real luck, because his flat and motivated refusal soon made me think to move the production towards the ruins of the city destroyed by the earthquake (by 'earthquaking' the text I had already written, and proportioning it to the new space which was opening to me).

"Are these ruins Troy, or Gibellina?", said a verse of my adaptation. "Is it Aeschylus, or his irremediable cancellation?" I would ask myself later.

Of course, Aeschylus thinned out more and more, in my *Oresteia*, until he disappeared in *Villa Eumènidì*, the last part of the trilogy which I custom re-made for Sicily, and for Sicilian people, in a very delicate moment of their history.

And yet, I was immensely grateful to the great philologist and scholar Benedetto Marzullo when he, in a public speaking about my failed translation, said bluntly that it was a perfect rendering of Aeschylus and his spirit. And at least I persuaded myself of that: to erase and to write are exactly the same thing.]

CAMILLA CAPORICCI*

Emanuel Stelzer, *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019, pp. 259

Abstract

This review of Emanuel Stelzer's *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances* underscores the originality and fruitfulness of the author's multi-disciplinary approach. The complex topic of staged portraits is explored from a great variety of perspectives and in connection with several aspects of early modern culture. The author is able to reveal the web of interconnections engendered by the staging of portraits in early modern drama, fostering a profound understanding of the ways in which these special props interfaced with issues crucial to the culture of the period.

KEYWORDS: portraits; early modern drama; visual culture; material culture; performance

"No nation in the world delights so much in having their own, or friends' or relations' pictures", Richard Steele wrote in the pages of the *The Spectator* in 1712. This is why, he proudly affirmed, the art of portraiture or "face-painting is nowhere so well performed than in England" (Steele 1837: 337-8). Whether we share Steele's opinion or not, this statement bears witness to a common idea that circulated among English intellectuals in the Renaissance. In response to what they felt as the overwhelming (and rather suffocating) superiority of Continental and particularly Italian painting, they began to claim portraiture, and especially miniature portraiture, as their own: the one field in which the English were "incomparably the best in Europe" (Norgate 1919: 20). This assertion also reflects an actual feature of English early modern painting, which, for a great variety of reasons beyond the scope of this review, was dominated by portraiture. It is to these enormously popular artworks, and particularly to their employment in the equally popular English dramatic production of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that Emanuel Stelzer's book, *Portraits in Early Modern English Drama: Visual Culture, Play-Texts, and Performances*, is devoted.

Rooted in the field of intermedial studies, Stelzer's volume fully participates in a wave of scholarly interest towards the relationship between early modern literature and visual arts that has steadily grown in the last century. This trend

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has reached a peak in recent years: suffice it to think of the amount and variety of works published on the subject in 2017 alone, including Michele Marrapodi's *Shakespeare and the Visual Arts*, John H. Astington's *Stage and Picture in the English Renaissance*, Keir Elam's *Shakespeare's Pictures*, Rocco Coronato's *Shakespeare, Caravaggio, and the Indistinct Regard*, and also B.J. Sokol's *Shakespeare's Artists*, published in January 2018.

Focused on the complex topic of staged portraits in early modern drama, the aim of the book, clearly stated at the beginning of the introduction, is an ambitious one: "to investigate how the presentation of portraits changed the interactive dynamics between actors and spectators; how staged pictures could address socially charged topics of the rich, though embattled, visual culture of the time; how these special props were employed by the playwrights and the playing companies to interrogate subjectivity, and, in particular, issues related to gender and class" (2). Availing himself of diverse approaches, ranging from those offered by semiotic and intermediality studies to those proper to visual and material culture, and placing his study at the crossroads of various disciplines, including art history, history of drama and literature, philosophy, sociology, and religious and gender studies, the author does not limit himself to a strictly 'literary' interpretation of the examined portraits. Indeed, he considers them from different and sometimes neglected perspectives and in relation to several aspects of early modern culture, in order to fully reveal, as he affirms, "the web of interconnections that grows out of the presentation of portraits on the early modern English stage" (243).

The book is divided into two main sections. The first one, entitled "The Meanings of Staged Portraits: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives", is devoted to an investigation of the web of interrelated meanings and functions generated by the staging of portraits in early modern England, which is done primarily through an inter-disciplinary, multifocal and well-documented exploration of the visual culture of the period. The section opens with a brief but dense methodological introduction, in which the author, entering in direct (and rather courageous) dialogue with a great number of scholars, discusses the complex dynamics characterizing the theatrical use of portraits as special props and their impact on the audience from a primarily semiotic standpoint. He then proceeds to highlight the importance of considering them as embedded in a specific visual culture. As he explains, the particular form of communication that portraits establish with their spectators is "regulated by subjective as well as socio-cultural pragmatics and modes of sense making", which is why "studying staged portraits requires knowing which type of portraits were present in early modern England and which uses they had in everyday life in different social backgrounds" (22). The next two chapters, therefore, explore several aspects of the visual culture of early modern England, focusing on the history and nature of early modern English portraiture and the ambiguous status of pictures in relation to the Reformation's iconoclasm – a long-debated question that the author treats in an original way, rejecting the iconophobia-iconophilia dualism and underscoring the impact of the early modern transition from speculative to enclosed visibility. In the chapter dedicated to the history of portraiture, the author leads the reader through a comprehensive

exploration of the portraiture of the period, with particular attention to the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, delving into both material and theoretical aspects. He shows how the portrait as we intend it today was in fact born in the late fifteenth century, contributing to new ways of conceptualizing the self and privacy; and he discusses the status of the English painters as well as the development of the market for portraits, which, far from being limited to royalty and aristocracy, extended also to the gentry and the middling sort. Finally, he offers a particularly insightful interpretation of the epistemological value of what he terms the “poetics of limning”: “a complex framework of tropes and rhetorical paradigms that correspond to gnoseological practice of coming to terms with a reality which was understood to be simultaneously opaque (needing revelatory illumination) and vacuous (needing demiurgic re-fashioning)” (62).

It is in the fourth and last chapter of the first section that portraits are finally brought on stage. What the author is interested in is, primarily, the performative function and power of portraits, and not just their role within the dramatic text. To put it in Keir Elam’s words, Stelzer is well aware that “in the domain of the text, the reference to a picture is a verbal event, apparently no different in kind from an allusion, say, to features of the landscape. In performance, however, the picture takes on potentially a quite different, non-verbal, dimension, becoming part of the visible world of bodies, of objects and of costumes, its material and semantic neighbours” (Elam 2017: 15). It is no accident, then, that the title’s last word is “Performances”. Despite the acknowledged difficulty of retrieving the original staging conditions and effects of portrait scenes, the author, profoundly aware of the multisensorial nature of the experience offered by early modern drama, makes a significant (and, I would say, successful) effort to reconstruct the way in which portraits functioned on stage, relying also on first-hand experience of recent productions.

After challenging the scholarly assumption that early modern theatre-goers went to “hear” a play rather than to “see” it, and highlighting the sensorial entirety of dramatic performance, the author focuses on the visual component of drama. In particular, he shows how this was perceived as the most dangerous characteristic of drama by Puritan antitheatricalists, on the basis that looking at pictures – meaning both paintings shown on stage but also the play itself, thought of as an essentially visual spectacle, a series of dynamised pictures – could transform the audience, altering their internal balance. Then, the author turns his attention towards his corpus: seventy-six plays, from the Elizabethan to the Caroline period, which feature the staging of a portrait. In order to throw new light onto the pictures’ multiple functions, Stelzer takes into account several material and often neglected aspects, such as the value and price of the staged pictures, and the way in which they represented female characters in a theatre in which women were impersonated by men actors. In this context, of particular importance is the discussion of the size and format of staged pictures. Opposing the dominant scholarly opinion that pictures on the early modern stages were usually miniatures – a position often bound with what the author calls the “obsolete myth of the bare stage” – Stelzer identifies thirty-seven plays in which the staged picture must have been a sizable portrait, designed to be visible to the spectators. This, of

course, opens up novel perspectives on the interaction between actors, portraits and audience, as a visible portrait engenders a set of dynamics entirely different from those prompted by the staging of an invisible (to the spectators) miniature.

In the second section of the book, entitled "Case Studies: Portraits in Action", Stelzer puts to the test the theoretical assumptions reached in the first part, showing how they can enlighten the dramatic transactions at work in five plays in which the staging of a portrait is endowed with particular significance: William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (and particularly the 1603 First Quarto); John Webster's *The White Devil* (1612); Philip Massinger's *The Picture* (published in 1630); William Sampson's *The Vow Breaker* (published in 1636), and William Cartwright's *The Siege* (published in 1651, but probably performed in 1637). Shakespearean scholars may feel a little disappointed to find no chapter dedicated to other famous portraits featured in the Bard's plays, such as Portia's miniature in *The Merchant of Venice*, or Silvia's portrait in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. However, the fact that the book is deliberately not Shakespeare-centred, unlike the majority of recent studies on the subject, constitutes one of its merits. By giving equal attention to five very different plays, written by very different authors and in different periods, Stelzer offers a more comprehensive and multi-perspective view of the uses and effects of staged portraits, fostering a deeper understanding of the way in which they negotiated issues crucial to early modern visual culture.

The first play Stelzer analyses is *Hamlet*, the only Shakespearean work the author takes into account. The study of *Hamlet*'s famous closet scene, including the prince's comparison of the pictures of his father and uncle, presents several points of originality in spite of the great amount of literature already dedicated to the subject. In particular, the comparison between the First Quarto (1603), the Second Quarto (1604-5) and the First Folio (1623) reveals that the visual dimension has a stronger role in the first version: the effects of vision, Stelzer argues, appear both more reliable and more prominent. In discussing the role of the portrait in *The White Devil*'s dumb show, both the power of the picture to shape the scene's main dynamics and Webster's interest in the materiality of portraiture are highlighted by the author, who claims the crucial importance of the prop as a semiotic focus as well as a transactional agent within the multimodal fabric of the play. In the study of Massinger's *The Picture*, of particular interest are not only the gender issues that the use of the portrait uncovers, but also the relationship Stelzer establishes between the "magical" picture, humouralism, and the fascinating theories of Giovanni Battista della Porta. The discussion of an actual picture, the woodcut illustration printed with *The Vow Breaker* which features the portrait of a dead character, introduces the exploration of this portrait's function within the play – a function that Stelzer interprets as a remarkable treatment of the English "theatregram" of the commemorative portrait in tragedy. Finally, an interesting examination of the role of the gaze in *The Siege* reveals the profound connection between the Neoplatonic doctrines permeating the Caroline court and its visual culture, and the concept of Platonic contemplation as it appears in the literature of the period.

The book closes with an extremely valuable appendix: a table detailing the seventy-six plays, from the Elizabethan to the Caroline period, which feature the

staging of a portrait. This table, as the author openly acknowledges, is based on the still unpublished dissertation of Yolana Wassersug (2015). However, Stelzer expands Wassersug's list, adding two plays and inserting useful information including the plays' genre, the names of the playwrights and playing companies who performed them, and the (supposed) size of the staged pictures. Evidently, this will be a useful tool for future studies on similar subjects.

In conclusion, Stelzer's book is both original and daring, offering innovative answers to long-debated issues as well as posing new, stimulating questions. Furthermore, and no less importantly, it is well written: despite the complexity of some of the arguments, the discussion is generally clear and easy to follow, and the dialogue established with a galaxy of extremely authoritative scholars boasts an advisable balance, the author's voice being neither gratuitously arrogant nor uselessly submissive. Finally, the style is fresh and lively, making for pleasant and enjoyable reading.

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Roberta Mullini, *Parlare per non farsi sentire. L'a parte nei drammi di Shakespeare*, Roma: Bulzoni Editore, 2018, pp. 145

Abstract

In her recent book *Parlare per non farsi sentire. L'a parte nei drammi di Shakespeare* (*Speaking not to be Heard: The Aside in Shakespeare's Plays*) Mullini re-examines taken-for-granted definitions of 'aside' and 'aside to', questions the idea of audience as explicit addressee of these dramatic conventions, probes the claim that Shakespeare used them mainly to characterise evil figures, and offers a detailed reading and pragma-linguistic analysis of selected asides through a quantitative analysis applied to the Shakespearean dramatic corpus by means of the Ant-Conc software, especially focusing on 'asides to'. Mullini challenges previous studies on Shakespeare's use of the aside, showing its relevance with regard to the characterisation of any character in crucial moments of the plot and, in the case of 'asides to', its importance to underline also the power distance between specific *dramatis personae*.

KEYWORDS: aside; aside to; Shakespeare; digital-humanities; pragma-linguistic

Parlare per non farsi sentire. L'a parte nei drammi di Shakespeare (*Speaking not to be Heard: The Aside in Shakespeare's Plays*) is a groundbreaking study on Shakespeare's asides, for both the originality of its approach and the results achieved. In her book Mullini re-examines taken-for-granted definitions of 'aside' and 'aside to', challenges the idea of the audience as explicit addressee of these dramatic conventions, probes the claim that Shakespeare used them mainly to characterise evil figures, and offers a detailed reading and pragma-linguistic analysis of selected asides through a quantitative analysis applied to the Shakespearean dramatic corpus by means of the Ant-Conc software, especially focusing on 'asides to'. In so doing, Roberta Mullini expands James E. Hirsh's 2003 fundamental investigation into Shakespeare's soliloquies, and adopts a perspective that cannot be found in recent works on the same topic. Indeed, Marcus Nordlund (2017) uses a digital-humanities approach as Mullini does, but offers, as suggested by the title of his book, *A Study of the Complete Soliloquies and Solo Asides* (thus excluding 'asides to'), interprets them through close reading, and considers these speeches as mostly audience-addressed; while Neil Corcoran 2018 provides readers with an insightful textual analysis of the most well-known monologues, always taking into account the play in performance (both on stage and on screen), but again disregarding 'asides to'.

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At the beginning of Mullini's book a very important point is made clear: the difficulty in defining the term 'aside' in its multifaceted aspects – as stressed also by Alan C. Dessen (1995: 49-55) – and the fluidity of the use of this word in the editorial history of the Shakespearean dramatic canon, which is not systematic and coherent, but rather inconsistent and variable, even “nearly idiosyncratic” (78). Today, the word 'aside' refers to a dramatic device by which a character addresses herself/himself, the audience or another character, 'without' being heard by those on stage. It is commonly associated with early modern English theatre, in particular with Shakespeare's plays – suffice it to mention Hamlet's “A little more than kin, and less than kind” (*Hamlet* 1.2) or Cordelia's “What shall Cordelia speak? Love, and be silent” in *King Lear* (1.1). But the word 'aside' never appears in the stage directions of the first editions of Shakespeare's works, either in Quarto or in Folio, with just a couple of exceptions.

Modern editors have been adding the directions 'aside' or 'aside to' since the eighteenth century, although not uniformly. The decision editors make to include or avoid this indication depends on the numerous implied stage directions one can find in Shakespeare's texts, but inevitably also on their personal idea of performance and of *mise en page*. The aside is a quintessentially metatheatrical convention in that it connects the three main components of the performance: actor-character-audience. Hence it reminds us that Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed and acted on stage for (and to some extent even with) an audience. This topic is crucial for Mullini, who opens the book discussing the dialectical tension between dramatic text and performance, corroborating the idea that drama criticism (i.e. the study of the play as literature) cannot be relegated to textual criticism only (mainly in the case of asides), but must always contemplate what happens in performance.

Building on this principle, in order to select the plays for analysis by using methodologies borrowed from the digital humanities, such as corpora and concordance software, Mullini carefully chooses one edition of the playwright's canon, namely the digital version of *The Complete Works* (1988) edited for Oxford University Press by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, because of its overall coherent employment of the direction 'aside' and, most importantly, because of its attention in helping readers imagine a possible performance of the plays. And yet, Mullini laments inconsistencies in signalling asides even within this same edition. The author is aware of the more recent Oxford edition (2016), which however was published after she had already carried out an advanced research work on Shakespeare's canon. Through her investigation, Mullini refers to other editions of Shakespeare's texts too (mainly the digital ones, such as “Internet Shakespeare Editions”, “Folger Digital Texts”, and “Open Source Shakespeare”), compares their use of the directions 'aside' and 'aside to', and underlines that one cannot but find incongruities in the parameters used by editors for additions and omissions. The latter do not simply reflect personal choices, but reveal an inconsistent *modus operandi* even by a single editor. This first phase of Mullini's quantitative analysis aims at producing a subcorpus of plays with more cases of aside than others, as well as at pinpointing their collocation within the plot. The scrutiny and the interpretation of the data collected through digital tools allow Mullini to select the

texts to be analysed, to group them by sub-genres, and to question the data and the results of previous research, such as the frequency of asides in Shakespeare's plays, the taxonomy of different types of aside, and their dramatic function.

One question challenged by Mullini is the so-called 'monological aside', as shown by the very title of one of her chapters – "Monological aside (?)" (54). The author demonstrates that through this label one signifies many types of speech that actually could be hardly gathered under the same umbrella-term. For example, in *Troilus and Cressida* Mullini identifies asides with a commentary function, fundamental for the information-flow, thus indirectly addressed to the audience; while in *Richard III* 1.3 Margaret's asides, who is eavesdropping on Elizabeth and Richard's dialogue, are both hidden comments, and lines rhetorically, but not 'factually', addressed to them. Developing Warren Smith's classification of asides further (1949), Mullini suggests the use of the expression "mono-dialogical asides" (67) for this type of convention.

The author also questions the label 'aside *ad spectatores*', as it should be exclusively used for monologues that contain explicit and direct references to the audience, thus breaking the so-called fourth wall. This leads Mullini to reconsider earlier studies, such as the above-mentioned 2017 volume by Nordlund or Manfred Pfister's 1988 book, where he claims that asides *ad spectatores* are frequent in Shakespeare and are mainly a prerogative of Machiavellian characters, the evil heirs of the Vice figure of earlier theatre. Both the quantitative evidence and the alleged use of asides *ad spectatores* as an element of characterisation of immoral figures are discarded in this volume.

Mullini has widely worked on the Tudor Vice, on its perlocutionary rhetoric and on its power to lead the plot, studying it in relation to the language of Shakespeare's fools and their function within the story (see 1983, 1988, 1992, 1997). On the ground of this knowledge and of the data collected on Shakespeare's asides, Mullini concludes that most of the asides *ad spectatores* only implicitly address the audience, because they do not contain evident marks of address, such as imperatives or vocatives. On the contrary, Shakespeare gives devious characters, such as Iago in *Othello* or Richard III in the homonymous play, longer monologues, not openly spoken to an audience. Mullini affirms that while Shakespeare "uses the mode privileged by the Vice, the typical character of Tudor drama till about 1580, to 'trap' the spectators in the intrigues he aims at plotting . . . he does not have his characters use [the Vice's] rhetorical means. It will be up to the director and the actor, then, to choose how to perform those monologues on stage" (72-3). Mullini shows that comic characters are instead the ones who involve the audience more frequently, but they do so, again, through longer speeches, better identifiable as monologues than as asides. To demonstrate this point she provides examples of marks of address directed to the audience taken from the monologues of Launcelot Gobbo in *The Merchant of Venice* and from those of Launce in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

The bulk of Mullini's investigation is on the stage direction 'aside to', which she defines as signalling "hidden dialogues" (85), or "private dialogues" (91). The author accepts Pfister's definition of 'asides to' as separate dialogues, concurrent to other dialogues on stage, but identifies particular formal and contextual fea-

tures: “Dialogical asides are characterised . . . by the conciseness of the remarks, sometimes hardly more than monosyllables, and by an indefinite rhetorical nature, between verse and prose . . . And it is because of these features that the dialogical aside seems closer to natural language” (79). Moreover, Mullini singles out the peculiar circumstances in which ‘asides to’ occur: situations marked by “either extreme necessity in relation to content, or by urgency due to the action on stage, or again by the playwright’s will to show privileged relationships between some of the characters” (ibid.).

‘Asides to’ occur about four times less than monological asides, but they are extremely interesting for the author, because they both vary greatly in typology, and are quite different from the other type of aside in lexical choices and structure. The cases investigated are from *Measure for Measure*, *Julius Caesar*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Henry VI, Part III*, *The Tempest* and *Henry VI, Part II*, and to each play an individual chapter is devoted.

These asides are studied from a pragma-linguistic perspective, an investigation Mullini started in 2016 (see Mullini 2016). The results achieved were again openly in disagreement with previous research, mainly Pfister 1988 (which, however, was not focused on Shakespearean plays, thus encompassing a more general perspective). Dialogical asides are not simply typical of petty characters and plotters, nor is it possible to see the aside as a tool for the characterisation of specific dramatic figures only. They have patterns and rhetorical strategies that replicate what happens in everyday language, particularly in situations of urgency, extreme need, or in contexts where there are confidential relationships between speakers.

In conclusion, Mullini shows that asides play an important role in Shakespeare and can be used by any type of character as an exceptionally apt device in the information flow to the audience (although not specifically addressed), particularly in crucial moments of the plot, to underline, in many different ways, the character’s fundamental stance and, in the case of ‘asides to’, also the power distance between specific *dramatis personae*.

This volume is a suitable reading for connoisseurs and university students alike. It is a valuable study that relates with the state of the art on the subject with methodological precision and extreme intellectual honesty, reaching new results and offering new interpretative models. For all this, the investigation offered by Mullini on ‘speaking not to be heard’ is definitely going ‘to be heard’, as it provides a significant contribution on the topic.

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Tradition and Revolution in Scottish Drama and Theatre: An Open Debate?

Abstract

The review aims to call attention to Mark Brown's recent study on Scottish theatre since 1969, the year that he identifies with the beginning in Scotland of a "revolution on stage" triggered by the reception and absorption of various aspects of European Modernist aesthetics on the part of some playwrights, theatre directors and companies. The book, well-founded and reader-engaging, is a must for anyone (expert or non) interested in Scottish theatre studies. However, the picture of Scottish history that ensues from it is incomplete, since, contrary to what archival scholarly research has proved, the author suggests that the 1560 Calvinist Reformation stamped out theatre and drama in Scotland for centuries, and it was only in the 1930s that it began coming out of that slump.

KEYWORDS: Mark Brown; Modernism; European theatre; twentieth-century and contemporary Scottish theatre

Mark Brown, *Modernism and Scottish Theatre Since 1303. A Revolution on Stage*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature Switzerland AG (Imprint of Palgrave Macmillan). pp. 266.

Mark Brown has been a professional theatre critic since 1994. He is the author of innumerable reviews published in various Scottish national newspapers, as well as of a number of critical essays appeared in collected editions and international theatre journals. He is also the editor of the book *Howard Barker Interviews 1980-2010: Conversations in Catastrophe* (Intellect Books, 2011). *Modernism and Scottish Theatre Since 1969. A Revolution on Stage* is his first extended study on Scottish theatre, the result of a research which he carried on at the University of Dundee for his PhD on contemporary drama.

1. Rationale and Argument

As suggested by the title, the book deals with the "revolution" or artistic renaissance that Brown sees developing in Scottish theatre from the 1960s onwards – a period which he regards as the most fertile in terms of innovations and creativity in the whole history of Scottish theatre. From the very beginning, he is rather peremptory in claiming that, unlike England or other European countries, Scot-

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land cannot boast any continuous Scottish theatrical tradition, mainly because of the long-term effects of the constraints imposed by state and church in the sixteenth century. Mark Brown wants to claim that, if in England theatre suffered prohibition only for the eleven years of Cromwellian Puritanism, in Scotland, Calvinism stamped it out from 1560 until the mid-eighteenth century, and, even later, it took a very long time for it to recover from this blow. He recognises the historiographical work carried out by Donald Campbell (1996), Bill Findlay (1998) and Ian Brown (2013), but, unlike these theatre historians, he argues that the Calvinist Reformation and the “suspicions and strictures of the state and Kirk” in the following centuries “seriously arrested the development of live drama in Scotland” (31) and had a “deadening impact on Scottish drama” (32), so much so that it was “still in search of a voice and an identity by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries” (ibid.). Taking issue with Ian Brown’s idea of a long, diversified, yet continuous and often forgotten, theatrical tradition in Scotland, Brown contends that, as late as the 1940s, when the Edinburgh International Festival first opened, “a truly thriving Scottish theatre scene was some decades off” (34).

If “Scottish theatre has had anything approximating a renaissance”, writes Brown, “it has occurred over the last five decades” (29). In his view, it is only in the late 1960s that one can identify a significant twist in what he sees as a centuries-long stagnating situation, thanks to the reception and absorption of aspects of European Modernist aesthetics on the part of some Scottish playwrights, theatre directors and companies. One might wonder why Brown neglects that European Modernism also influenced Scottish theatre while it was actually happening, in particular as regards its avant-garde and political manifestations – as proven by the impact that German director Erwin Piscator had on Glasgow Unity Theatre (cfr. Mackenney 2001). However, leaving aside what one would normally regard as milestones of European Modernism, such as the theatre of Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter, he focuses instead on other four specific, yet rather eclectic, “agents” (7), as he calls them: the concept of theatrical *auteurism*, the legacy of Brecht’s theatre, the theories of Jacques Lecoq, and the influence of the English playwright Howard Barker.

Through a detailed analysis, Brown shows that such a “European Modernist renaissance” was initiated by Giles Havergal in 1969, when he became the director of the Citizens Theatre in Glasgow and, for thirty-four years, managed to challenge the supremacy of London. In fact, he was not alone in his theatrical revolution: from the start, he collaborated with the theatre designer Philip Prowse, who then became his co-director, and two years later, in 1971, they were joined by Robert David MacDonald as second co-director – together they became known as “the triumvirate”. Then Brown draws a red thread between the trio’s innovative management and the activity in the 1980s of the touring company Communicado headed by Gerry Mulgrew, whose “popular experimentalism” (91) marked another step in the development of a European Modernist strand in Scottish theatre. Unlike the Citizens, the Company combined an engagement with European theatre with an interest for Scottish literature and new writing, a choice which was shared by later companies, such as, among others, Suspect Culture and Untitled Projects. Finally, Brown suggests that three further moments can be associated

with a Modernist “revolution on stage”. The first moment coincides with what he defines as the “golden generation” (43) of Scottish playwrights in the 1990s, mostly represented, in his view, by the four authors he interviewed for the book: David Greig, Zinnie Harris, David Harrower and Anthony Neilson – “the finest Scottish playwrights, not only of their generation, but of any generation” (113). The second moment is marked by the work of the director and designer Stewart Laing, founder of the Untitled Projects Company in 1998. Finally, the third moment is when the National Theatre of Scotland, a “theatre without walls” (205), was launched in 2006.

Ultimately, in his conclusion, Brown strongly reaffirms his argument by suggesting that, since the contemporary theatrical scene in Scotland seems to have “gone into something of a lull since the notable successes of original plays such as Neilson’s *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004) and Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* (2006)” (235), it should “learn from the tremendous steps forward it has taken in aesthetics and playwriting over the last half-century” (236), that is, from those who contributed to the European Modernist renaissance in Scottish theatre.

2. General Structure and Contents

Throughout his book, Brown holds fast to his theory, supporting it unwaveringly along a well-traced path. At times, though, being so utterly focused on his objective, he incurs the risk of losing the wider perspective and missing important points, as will be explained in section three of this review.

On the whole, the seven chapters of the book can be divided into three parts followed by a conclusion. The first part (chapters 1 to 4) is the result of Brown’s meticulous research on twentieth-century Scottish theatre started during his PhD years, particularly on the ways in which it has received and appropriated some constituent elements of Modernist drama from the late Sixties onwards. The second part (Chapter 5) consists of five interviews to contemporary playwrights (David Greig, Zinnie Harris, David Harrower and Anthony Neilson) and the leading director/ designer Stewart Laing. Finally, the third part of the book (Chapter 6) focuses on the National Theatre of Scotland (NTS).

Chapter 1 is a Preface aimed at tracing the main four points of contact between European Modernism and Scottish theatre since the late Sixties. The first point is “auteurism”, which Brown derives from the concept of directorial *auteur* in cinema criticism, in particular Truffaut’s and Godard’s *Nouvelle Vague* in the Fifties and Sixties. An *auteur* director imposes his personality on a text, and, contravening the conventions of naturalism as to time/place setting, costumes and set designs, adapts it to his own ideas. An example is the “early-Modernist” (9) Alfred Jarry, who wrote and directed his own plays, whom Brown compares to Howard Barker in England and to the aforesaid triumvirate in Scotland (Havergal, Prowse and MacDonald). After auteurism, Brown focuses on three further agents triggering the Scottish theatrical renaissance: first, Brecht’s aesthetics rather than politics, namely his alienation techniques, narrative realism and metatheatricity; secondly, Jacques Lecoq’s theatre “of movement and gesture”; and finally, the the-

atre of Howard Barker, despite his outspoken reluctance to be formally identified with any specific literary movement or tradition, including Modernism. However, Brown regards him as unconsciously “steeped in the work of some of the greatest European Modernist artists” (20). By stating in the final section of Chapter 1 that “postmodernism’s influence in the theatre has been exaggerated” (24), Brown intends to boost his argument and convince the reader that there is nothing anachronistic about referring to late-twentieth and twenty-first-century artists as “Modernists”.

Chapter 2 provides the proper Introduction. Here Brown begins by re-stating his argument, repeating once again the aims of his book, and summarising the prime movers and forces which, from the late 1960s onwards, determined that radical transformation in Scottish theatre already amply presented in Chapter 1. However, this is also the section of the book in which the author includes “An Historical Note” in order to add details in support of his argument, which, he claims, “has the virtues of being rooted in serious, conceptual thinking and rigorous, largely original research” (29). From what he regards as the generally provincial and infirm scenario of post-Reformation Scottish theatre and playwriting, Brown only rescues the Glasgow Repertory Company, the Scottish National Players, and a few playwrights in the first half of the twentieth century, while taking a distance from those theatre historians or critics who, on the contrary, argued for a continuity of a lively theatrical tradition in Scotland both at the time and after John Knox’s arrival. Moreover, even the success of such companies as 7:84 Scotland and Wildcat in the Seventies does not shake his firm belief that “the aesthetics of live drama in Scotland in the new millennium” has not so much been influenced by these politicised groups as by the “European Modernist revolution started by Giles Havergal and the Citizens Theatre in 1969” (40).

“The Havergal Revolution” is the main focus of Chapter 3. Brown writes that, thanks to Havergal’s directorship, from 1969 to 2003, Glasgow’s Citizens Theatre “provided the initial impetus” of the renaissance that Scottish theatre has undergone since the late Sixties. Unfortunately, his successors Jeremy Raison (from 2003 to 2010) and Dominic Hill (from 2011 to the present) did not always live up to the standards of his innovative policies, cutting-edge productions – mainly based on a continental European repertoire –, international standing and “modernisation” (58). In his typical, rather enthralling, journalistic style, Brown reviews and comments on some of these ingenious productions (e.g. an *outré* version of *Hamlet*, *De Sade Show*, and a highly acclaimed adaptation of *À la recherche du temps perdu*). There are various sections of the book in which, as in this one, the reader has the impression of leafing through engaging theatre reviews – which of course does not have to be necessarily regarded as a fault.

If, on the one hand, the post-Havergal production at the Citizens lost part of its revolutionary impetus, on the other, Brown sees a line of continuity between Havergal’s policies and the experimental work of Communicado theatre company in the 1980s. This is the object of Chapter 4. One of the company founders, Gerry Mulgrew, was inspired by Havergal’s European Modernist aesthetics and anti-naturalist theatre, which he combined with his interest in Scottish literature and the Scottish vernacular. As a paradigmatic example of this “embedding [of] Europe-

an Modernist aesthetics in Scottish theatrical culture" (112), Brown indicates the Company's rather *sui-generis* stage version, in 2009 and 2012, of Robert Burns's *Tam o' Shanter*.

In Brown's view, Havergal's legacy is also evident in the 1990s in the work of four major contemporary playwrights (David Greig, Zinnie Harris, David Harrower and Anthony Neilson), and the *auteur* director/designer Stewart Laing. As has been mentioned, Chapter 5 consists of five interviews with these theatremakers, each of which is preceded by a biographical introduction to the interviewee, while, after all of them, Brown adds his concluding comments, once again to build on his central argument. Without ever losing his grip, he maintains that the five figures, more or less consciously, "belong to the same European Modernist strand in Scottish theatre", and each of them "has made a unique and crucial contribution to Scotland's theatrical renaissance" (203).

Brown furthers his case in Chapter 6. Here he shows how the National Theatre of Scotland, since its inception in 2006, has contributed to the dissemination of European modernism in Scottish Theatre and continues to do so under the directorship of Jackie Wylie, "a creative producer with a very strong grounding in Modernist and experimental theatre and performance" (224). Chapter 7 builds on this reference to Wylie's internationalist perspective, resumes some of the considerations already made in Chapter 1, and finally closes the circle by encouraging a reflection on the future of Scotland's theatrical renaissance, on how, that is, contemporary playwrights have or have not received the legacy of Havergal's revolution, of Comunicado theatre company and of the Nineties "golden generation".

3. Strengths and Weaknesses

There is no denying that Mark Brown's book is a well-grounded, informative and, in many ways, impressive work. He paves the way for new challenging discussions about Scottish theatre from the late Sixties up to now, pushing the expert reader to review or resume his/her assumptions, as well as encouraging the amateur interested in Scottish theatre to discover more about the protagonists of the "Modernist revolution". Thus, for anyone doing research on twentieth-century Scottish theatre, this book must be included among their references, in addition to important critical contributions by, *inter alia*, Ian Brown, Bill Findlay, Ksenija Horvat, Tom Maguire, Adrienne Scullion, Donald Smith, Trish Reid, Randall Stevenson, and Gavin Wallace (cf. list of works cited).

In this delicate historical moment, moreover, Brown's highlighting the Europeanness of the Citizens Theatre at the time of the aforesaid "triumvirate", or Comunicado's intention to promote a European theatre "in a distinctive, Scottish vernacular" (97) has important resonances. In particular, a statement stands out in the interview with David Greig, when the playwright, inspired by the Europeanness that emerged around 1969, refers to his collaboration with European companies in the Nineties. That "Europeanness", he says, "allows [Scottish artists] a context, so they can be a centred Scotland, Edinburgh, Glasgow in a Europe that contains countries like Holland, Denmark and Norway" (118). Thus, one

of the book's main merits is that it foregrounds the international reputation and transnational scope of Scottish theatre from the late Sixties to today, which means dialogue with other theatrical strands and diversity, without necessarily repudiating distinctive, national or local traditions.

Such important claims are made by the author by means of a generally conversational style which certainly has the advantage of being captivating for both an expert and a general readership. Indeed, what to the former kind of readers could appear plethoric – like the footnotes providing basic information about canonical playwrights and well-known literary strands – may, on the contrary, be welcomed by the latter. Brown never takes off the mask of the theatre reviewer. Clearly enough, his sparkling presentation of stage performances and shows derives from his regular playhouse attendance of the theatrical world, in Scotland and abroad.

While surveying twentieth-century Scottish theatre, he exhibits all his field-work experience with theatre managers, productions and companies, thus clearly giving priority to the performative, contextual and cultural elements pertaining to a theatrical event, rather than tarrying over theoretical issues around it or entering play-texts to propose close readings. His methodological choice may of course disappoint the literary scholar in search of more challenging hermeneutic efforts, but the entertaining effect is guaranteed, and so is the wealth of interesting information that one can acquire.

These strengths, however, are counterbalanced by a few weaknesses which cannot be overlooked. One of them emerges when Brown tries to (rein)force his argument by showing evidence of the lack of a clearly identifiable and strong theatrical tradition in Scotland before the 1960s. Although he draws an enticing map of Scottish theatre's indebtedness to European Modernism from that decade onwards, when he makes *en-passant* remarks calling attention to earlier theatre history, he overlooks, or can be even dismissive of, sterling studies by authoritative scholars in the field. For example, during the interview, David Greig reminds him that playwright and critic Ian Brown has written about a "long Scottish theatrical tradition that we have forgotten", and Mark Brown replies that he "would challenge him to find the playwrights, Sir David Lyndsay aside, who compare with the likes of Liz Lochhead, David Harrower and Zinnie Harries" (119). Earlier on in the book he is in fact much harsher towards Lyndsay, too: "Whether one considers Lyndsay's *Ane Satyre* to be an historical curiosity . . . or a genuinely outstanding work of Renaissance drama, few critics would claim that the sixteenth-century Scottish knight deserves a place in the pantheon of northern European playwrights" (33). In fact, in June 2013 a full-length production of Lyndsay's seminal play took place in the historic setting of Linlithgow Palace, Edinburgh, and none other than Gerry Mulgrew of Communicado Theatre Company played in it.

Sometimes Brown confuses theatrical traditions with individual authors' achievements: not all periods provide household names that made the history of Scottish theatre, but neither playwriting nor stage performance were at any moment totally stamped out in Scotland. Even a quick browsing through Glasgow University's Scottish Theatre Archive or the National Library of Scotland catalogues would provide evidence of this fact. Undeniably, the 1990s saw a lucky

concentration of brilliant playwrights making their appearance on the Scottish stage (and Brown's examples are not the only ones), but to assess earlier dramatists in relation to these contemporary voices instead of understanding them in the light of their historical and cultural backdrops runs the typical risks of all presentist approaches: anachronism and decontextualization.

Mark Brown disagrees with those critics who recognize the existence of a theatrical tradition (or traditions) in Scotland before the 1930s, whereas, in his view, it is only then that a Scottish "theatre culture . . . [began] to stand on its own feet as a national theatre scene" (35). As ground-breaking scholarly research has proved, during all those centuries between the 1560 Reformation and the twentieth-century, "whether we think of folk drama, Kirk drama, street drama, rural drama or the theatrical drama of the urban middle and upper classes, whether in Gaelic, Scots, English and even Latin, a wide range of theatrical forms was available" (Brown 2011: 2). As a matter of fact, pioneering academic work by Terence Tobin, Ian Brown, Bill Findlay, Adrienne Scullion, and Barbara Bell, to mention just a few, has shown how Scotland has had a lively tradition of drama (if not always of playhouse theatre) since the sixteenth century.

In illuminating essays, Sarah Carpenter and Ian Brown have shown that dramatic performance and various forms of theatricality flourished before as well as after the 1560 Reformation, in most cases upheld by the institutions of the day, such as the Church, the burgh and the court (Brown, Carpenter 2011). Both public and private performance, therefore, continued to be vibrant and dynamic throughout the 1560-1800 period and even included some highlights which are too often forgotten nowadays. For instance, Mark Brown ignores George Buchanan's influential plays, which were "models adopted by Corneille and Racine" (Brown 2011: 2), or the contribution made to Restoration comedy by Scottish writers such as Catherine Trotter, whom feminist critics rescued from oblivion – *in primis* Anne Kelley (2002).

In the eighteenth century, indeed, Scottish drama and theatre was far from being an irrelevant genre. One just needs to mention the ballad-opera version of Allan Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd* (1729) and John Home's blank-verse tragedy *Douglas* (1756), both extremely successful also as stage performances, to give evidence of the contrary. In fact, Brown refers to *Douglas* as a "celebrated and controversial event" offering "Scottish theatre audiences a flicker of patriotic cultural self-assertion", but then writes that it "did not remain celebrated for very long" (33-5). This assessment is confuted by the fact that, after its première in 1756, it continued to be produced not only in Scotland but throughout Britain for at least another century, and it faded from view in the mid-nineteenth century owing to a change in theatrical tastes and styles, such as the growing success of Thomas William Robertson's cup-and-saucer drama.

From Brown's point of view, moreover, there seems to be a sort of theatrical vacuum between Home and the 1960s. He claims that "theatre in Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and into the early twentieth, was far more likely to be influenced by touring work from London than any supposed hidden gems written in Scotland after the Reformation" (35). As has been mentioned, archival research has proved the contrary, bringing to surface once marginalised or

totally neglected figures, and recognizing the innovative and experimental quality of their works. Brown overlooks them, as he seems to forget that the idea of a fixed literary “canon” and the Leavis-like concept of an organic “great tradition” have been long superseded by a more dynamic and multifarious idea of culture and literary production. Recent studies on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Scottish theatre have, for example, brought attention to the unjust neglect suffered by Scottish women dramatists, such as Jean Marishall, Eglantine Wallace, Christian Carstairs, Mary Diana Dods and Frances Wright, who importantly contributed to the Romantic-period theatrical development (Angeletti 2010).

It is, moreover, disappointing not to find in Brown any mention of a key early nineteenth-century playwright like Joanna Baillie, author of the ground-breaking *Plays on the Passions*, or, of an early twentieth-century dramatist like James Barrie, a man of the theatre by vocation, whose social plays were highly admired by Bernard Shaw, although he is now mostly remembered as the author of the novel *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*. In fact, both wrote plays which were by no means naturalist, and Barrie is regarded as a modernist by some scholars, so one might suspect that Mark Brown deliberately omitted them in order not to undermine the persuasive force of his argument. And what about the popularity of the theatrical adaptations of Scott’s novels, which, in the nineteenth-century, as Barbara Bell (2011) has argued, contributed to the development of the peculiarly Scottish phenomenon of the “National Drama”?

By the same token, Mark Brown undervalues the importance of twentieth-century popular theatre influenced by the music-hall and Scottish songs traditions, and too quickly skips through the non-naturalist, experimental work of the pre-war playwright James Bridie. He also misses major playwrights in the 1960s who predated Haverгал, such as Stanley Eveling and C.P. Taylor, the former in every sense a Modernist, the latter not entirely so, yet not a naturalist either, as proved by his revisionist historical plays, questioning traditional myths and crossing conventional genre boundaries.

Moreover, Brown slightly mentions or even forgets playwrights who started to emerge in the late 1970s, flourished in the 1990s and, in some cases, are still centre stage nowadays like his four interviewees, and like them often challenge the conventions and strategies of naturalist theatre. Suffice it to remember here the pioneering role that Joan Ure played in setting the ground for a group of Scottish women playwrights that would deserve a place beside Zinnie Harris (one of the “big four” selected by Brown), whereas Brown either quickly mentions them (Rona Munro and Sue Glover) or totally bypasses them (Ann Marie di Mambro, Marcella Evaristi, Sharman Macdonald, and Catherine Lucy Czerkawska, among others), even if, in some cases, there are aspects in the playwriting of these authors that can be aligned with the Modernist Revolution he delineates throughout his book – Ure’s lyrical, symbolic drama or Evaristi’s introspective focus, for instance. All these examples testify to the fact that, despite moments of interruption or crisis, over the centuries Scotland did actually have a thriving Scottish theatrical and dramatic tradition. Thus, to identify its theatrical golden age only with the last fifty years is, to say the least, reductive.

In other words, if, on the one hand, Brown’s central thesis appears well-

grounded and in many respect convincing, on the other hand, it is sometimes imposed too rigidly. For example, none of the interviewees seems to directly associate himself or herself with a specific Modernist strand; at times, they even seem to dissent from him reading their works or activities as hostile to the tradition of naturalism and irrefutably demonstrating his thesis – both Harris and Harrower explicitly (at moments resentfully) take issue with the idea that their works epitomize the European Modernist revolution in Scottish theatre.

Brown must find his way out of what might end up in an annoying impasse, so about Harris he asserts that, despite her doubts, she “is nevertheless willing to accept that, if European Modernist theatre is constituted as this work suggests it is, she is certainly a Modernist writer” (192). Likewise, having to respond to Harrower’s scepticism about being pigeonholed as a European Modernist artist, Brown has no hesitation to say that Harrower’s hostility to postmodernism, added to “the Pinteresque dimension in his work, his Barkerian ‘anti-historicism’ and his attraction to Büchner’s ‘brokenness’” makes it “difficult to resist the idea that Harrower is, in a number of very profound and fundamental ways, a Modernist dramatist” (196-7). The “Notes on the Interviews” confirm Brown’s unwavering defence of his argument, since they tend to reiterate and reinforce the main issues and points raised by his questions to the interviewees, rather than adding new comments or suggesting new insights into their conscious or unconscious allegiance to European Modernism.

Despite these reservations, mainly aroused by the incomplete picture of Scottish theatre which Brown draws by overlooking or erasing centuries of a rich and diverse dramatic culture, Brown’s book is a good read, entertainingly accompanying the reader through an exciting scenario of plays, dramatists, theatre companies and events, and drawing attention to the international aura of twentieth-century Scottish theatre. Ultimately, whether the author likes it or not, his new book, combined with different accounts of Scotland’s theatre and drama history, cannot but enhance the value of a tradition begun many centuries earlier than 1969.

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Dirk Gindt, *Tennessee Williams in Sweden and France, 1945-1965. Cultural Translations, Sexual Anxieties and Racial Fantasies*, London and New York: Methuen, 2019, pp. 257

Abstract

Building on Peter Burke's and Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural translation as a process in which readers in one social, aesthetic and historical environment negotiate the meaning of a particular text that originates in a different context, Dirk Gindt has investigated the migration process of five plays by America's foremost playwright, Tennessee Williams, towards France and Sweden between 1945 and 1965. *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Orpheus Descending* and *Suddenly Last Summer* were directed and acted, with rare exception, with blatantly sexualized and racialized characters and settings. This, in turn, provided critics with ammunition to incite public scandal and outrage or dismiss the plays as products of a nation with an immature theatrical culture. The book delves into myriads of reviews and other elements connected with the transcultural passage of these works to offer an interdisciplinary study of the negotiations involved in the process, with a keen eye for such meaningful issues as sexuality, race, gender and nation.

KEYWORDS: race; gender; sexuality; homophobia; Tennessee Williams; France; Sweden

Tennessee Williams is undoubtedly the American playwright whose work has been most widely disseminated outside of his native country. Some of the reasons why this has happened are the unfailing transpositions of his plays into Hollywood films, the fact that he started writing at a time when the American cultural hegemony in the world reached a peak, and the titillating sexual elements in his plays, that anticipated deep changes taking place in Western civilization in the following decades. Choosing to focus on five plays, two countries and a specific time span, Dirk Gindt's book adds relevant insight to contemporary Tennessee Williams scholarship, to drama studies and to the transcultural approach in the humanities.

From the late 1940s to the early 1960s most European theatre-goers were exposed to the controversial effects caused by Williams's plays of the time, whether directly (when witnessing actual performances) or indirectly (reading the reviews), and his theatre formed part of cultural debates especially tackling such issues as gender, sexuality, race, and nation. It is in these points of convergence, as

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stated by the subtitle to Gindt's book, that lies his motivation for choosing to investigate two nations apparently quite different from each other. The American playwright's theatre, in fact, raised questions that were meaningful for both countries and provoked responses that were sometimes similar, sometimes differed according to the social conditions of Sweden and France, and the book never fails to acknowledge coincidences or to compare and explain differences.

On top of this, Williams's plays were connected, in the two nations, by the strategic operations of a Swedish agent/producer, Lars Schmidt (1917-2009), who passed from owning a small publishing company to being the most significant cultural ambassador for post-WW II American theatre in Europe. Such information is available because Gindt's method of research goes beyond textual analysis to encompass all the elements that are involved in the cultural translation of a piece of theatre, including actors, directors, costume and scene designers, translators, adaptors, advertisers, agents and, most important, the journalists who provided the theatre reviews through which new plays were supposedly explained, evaluated and judged. Building on Peter Burke's and Homi Bhabha's concept of cultural translation, Gindt has thus provided a fascinatingly detailed assessment of the "various layers of the production and reception of Williams' plays in Sweden and France as processes of interpretation, negotiation and creative tension between various national, cultural and linguistic contexts" (198). The plays that have been taken into consideration are among the most prominent in the Williams canon, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), his masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). All of them were variously produced in Sweden and France, except for the rewriting of the Orpheus theme, which was not staged in the Scandinavian country. But despite (or thanks to) this choice, it is noteworthy that Gindt's transcultural approach not only offers new insight in the foreign reception of America's most iconic and influential playwright, it also generates a cultural history of mid-century theatre in Sweden and France well beyond the specific single artist.

What the Swedish scholar does, indeed, is to identify and draw a web of interwoven forces generated by the transcultural migration of five among the most representative plays of post-World War II American theatre towards two European nations that soon recognized Tennessee Williams as an extremely rich site for debating controversial issues such as male homoeroticism, female sexual desire, race and national identity, among others. What results is "the first book on Williams to devote equal attention to both sexual and racial politics and the intersection of these outside of an American context" (20).

Each new premiere performance of a Williams play, starting from his first international success, *The Glass Menagerie*, lent itself to various reactions in audiences and critics, which often involved negotiations of fears, fantasies and anxieties bringing "to the surface sexual and racial phobias that questioned and threatened to uncover myths of national or cultural homogeneity" (12-3). Whereas *The Glass Menagerie* was considered, we could say, the 'meekest' of these plays in terms of provocative power, his following work, the world-reknowned dramatic portrait of Blanche DuBois, the embodiment of an old aristocracy overwhelmed

by history and by the brutal assault of an alpha-man, did not fail to unleash opinionated reactions in both countries. At the beginning, Laura Wingfield's demure tragedy of gradual withdrawal from reality into her world of glass animals simply puzzled European critics for its mixture of realism and symbolism. Perceived as a weird specimen of American modernity in terms of dramatic structure, it nonetheless garnered commercial success and praises in Sweden that were slower to come from the French intelligentsia, which was still treasuring neo-classical rules in the theatre and 'defending' them from foreign contamination.

1949 was the year in which *A Streetcar Named Desire* started its as of today unstoppable route outside the United States, being directed in January in Rome by Luchino Visconti, in March in Gothenburg by Ingmar Bergman, and in October in Paris by Raymond Rouleau, who put up a French version adapted by Jean Cocteau. By no means devoid of sexual and racial innuendo, the play was received in each of these countries causing reactions that mirrored the specific cultural *milieu* it encountered. In Sweden, a social Darwinist reading of the play as the depiction of a "rotten branch" of American society being liquidated by newer forces bespeaks a dark side in the supposedly progressive Scandinavian spirit. Despite its aura of sexually liberated culture, Swedish society was all but immune to fears of degeneration. The stately sponsored Institute for Racial Biology, founded in 1922 and still active at the time of these performances, "took eugenics to an unprecedented level by studying the alleged relationship between race and mental illness, alcoholism and criminality, all in the name of social hygiene and national health" (51). Furthermore, a large-scale sterilization programme started in the previous decade allowed doctors to overrule the wishes of the patient if the latter was deemed unfit to form part of the *folkemmet*, the "People's Home", as envisioned by the ruling Social Democratic party. It is in this atmosphere that the play was staged and received, and it is no surprise that most reviews mirrored these anxieties, also because the directors themselves, both in Sweden and in France, chose to overly sexualize and racialize Williams's text. Neither culture, in fact, was yet ready to assimilate and directly face the play's explicit and groundbreaking representation and embodiment of sexual desire. As would happen to most of Williams's successive heroines, Blanche was dubbed a nymphomaniac simply because she dared express her sexual desires and Stanley's rape of his sister-in-law was often underrated as a natural male reaction. Racial elements also came to the fore, as the Paris production "relied on deeply rooted tropes of colonial representation to project the white characters' immense desires onto sexualized Black bodies. Racialization was thus key to visualize, stage, review and debate the erotic appetite and appeal of the main characters. In both countries, it marked a defence mechanism to keep white sexuality under control" (200).

The fact that Williams's characters and plots were at odds with the heteronormativity and male chauvinist hegemony of the burgeoning Cold War period was nowhere more evident than with the stagings of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Women's bodies as personifications of their desires through actual conspicuousness on stage were also quite daring for the times, and Maggie the Cat's feline femininity, iconized on film by Elizabeth Taylor, was one of the main topics tackled by reviewers of the play. In Sweden, the play was staged at a key historical moment,

when the myth of Swedish tolerance in sexual matters was turning against itself and becoming negative, tagging the national character as sinful. The French production, on the other hand, directed by British dramaturg Peter Brook, played on the myth of Parisian sensuality and, by casting Jeanne Moreau as the heroine – decked in flimsy Coco Chanel designed clothes – deflected the focus of the play from her husband's tormented homoeroticism to a heterosexualized display of female beauty. In Italy, directed by Belgian born Raymond Rouleau (who had directed *Streetcar* in Paris), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (with Lea Padovani in the title role) significantly did not need any directorial intervention in order to be 'normalized': the overarching heteronormative culture made it impossible for reviewers to believe that Brick Pollitt could have had a physical or sentimental attraction to his sporting buddy Skipper, so much so that the ambiguity of the plot was often solved by reviewers blaming Maggie for Skipper's death and for her husband's emotional paralysis. Homophobia – in this case meaning blindness to the rules of attraction – was easily coupled with misogynist dismissals of woman's essential 'wickedness'.

This shows how Williams's texts lent themselves to delicate processes of cultural translation, in which some elements were lost, others were misinterpreted, but all of them, by touching many a raw nerve, are now proving extremely relevant for investigating theatrical culture in the countries in which they were staged, and for understanding how such cultures mirrored social tensions of the time. As was happening in other European countries (in Italy, Germany, and to a lesser extent, because of Franco's regime, in Spain), Tennessee Williams's plays elicited biased reviews in which the United States and Broadway were conceptualized as Europe's theatrical Other, "and the representation of sexuality became a key tool for consistently contrasting and judging Swedish and French values, norms, aesthetic ideals and cultural identity against their imagined American counterparts" (90). Homosexuality, for example, was deemed to be one of America's obsessions, as Robert Anderson's 1953 *Tea and Sympathy* was playing in Paris at the same time as *Cat*. The play likewise dramatized 'accusations' of same-sex attraction leveled at a school boy (as had happened with another sensational Broadway play that dealt with same-sex love in an all-female school, Lillian Hellman's *The Children's Hour*, 1934), once again chalking up the subject to matters of gossip, misunderstandings or unresolved ambiguities. The way Brick and Skipper's relationship and their mutual connection to Maggie were understood in the two nations investigated by Gindt thus says a lot about the development of sexual mores of those cultures in a specific historical period, in which theatre was still the site through which people could negotiate contemporary anxieties about sexuality, gender and nation.

One of the harshest comments on Jeanne Moreau playing Maggie the Cat in sexy lingerie was aired on the French radio in 1957 by a journalist who maintained there was no lack of establishments in Paris where one could be treated to similar entertainment without having to listen to dramatic dialogue and with the possibility of buying much cheaper entrance tickets. As Gindt has wisely noted, equating Moreau's "performance to a striptease in the red-light district was a convenient way to take off the edge of the character who refuses to give in to the

overbearing patriarchal mentality and mendacity that holds its grip on the Pollitt family" (132).

Apparently more daring and provoking than the other plays (in Italy it was not produced until 1991), *Suddenly Last Summer*, with its gloomy jungle-garden background and Darwinian violence exposed, marked the beginning of France's actual appreciation of Williams's theatre. It should be noted that it was staged in 1965, when the aftershock of decolonization had already deeply changed consciences and its anti-racist undercurrent was more easily graspable. The play was so much perceived as a meaningful and timely cultural product, that it was appropriated by the innovative company Les Trétaux de France, a travelling ensemble that, focusing on *la banlieu* and *les provinces*, was indeed one of the pivotal agents of theatre decentralization in France. *Orpheus Descending* had been produced in France six years before (directed by Rouleau), but its Southern setting and racial theme were either too exoticed or misinterpreted, its women still judged by the harsh standards of nineteenth century psychiatry. Carol Cutriere, for example, the young rebel who voices her sexual desires, was defined by a French reviewer as "the nymphomaniac on duty in Mr. Tennessee Williams' theatre" (147). Only a few years later, French critics – who had willingly travelled to the *banlieu* to watch *Suddenly Last Summer* – interpreted the newest production as "a successful attempt at capturing essential truths about humanity: the destiny of the weak, sensitive or artistically minded who, as dictated by the logics of Social Darwinism, were doomed to be crushed and devoured by the stronger ones" (185). Homophobic remarks were disappearing from reviews, as were accusations of antiquated naturalism (levelled at *Orpheus Descending*), excessive melodrama or Freudian obsessions. French theatre intelligentsia was growing up, and it was doing so also thanks to the constant challenges posed by Tennessee Williams's plays. On Scandinavian stages, instead, *Suddenly Last Summer* marked the beginning of the author's fall from grace with Swedish critics and audiences, an abrupt change that was about to mark Williams's career in all the countries where he had been most lionized, and that would last until his death in 1983, when he was quickly turned into a modern classic.

Women Against War. *The Trojan Women*, *Helen*, and *Lysistrata* at Syracuse

Abstract

Two tragedies by Euripides (*Helen* and *The Trojan Women*) and a comedy by Aristophanes (*Lysistrata*) were presented at the 55th Festival of Greek Theatre at Syracuse (10 May-6 July 2019) on the theme 'women and war'. The productions of the three plays were not, however, equally successful from an artistic point of view. Davide Livermore, a director whose main field is opera, was able, with his staging of *Helen*, to create a spectacle both ground-breaking and courageous, by projecting Euripides' original work into a visionary and fantastic cosmos where different literary genres (tragedy, comedy, melodrama, *opera buffa*), different temporal dimensions and sensory perceptions mingle and overlap. The staging of *The Trojan Women* by the French director Muriel Mayette-Holtz (too great a distance between scenography and original text) and that of *Lysistrata* by Tullio Solenghi (overstated didacticism) were not as artistically effective.

KEYWORDS: Euripides; Aristophanes; Syracuse; Greek tragedy; Davide Livermore; Muriel Mayette-Holtz; Tullio Solenghi

The theme 'women and war' was the *fil rouge* between the three plays presented at the 55th season of the Teatro Greco at Syracuse in 2019. Two tragedies and a comedy were performed: *The Trojan Women* and *Helen* by Euripides and *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes. The organizers' selection finds its justification above all from the point of view of chronology: the three dramas were originally staged for the first time in Athens one after the other within a few years, between 415 and 411 BC, when the city was facing one of the most difficult moments of a long war that ended in its defeat. These were the years of the Athenian expedition to Sicily (415-413) which ended in the disastrous conquest of the Athenian troops; and, also, the period in which there were sensational upheavals in the constitution, with the *coup d'état* on the part of the oligarchs in 411 and the successive restoration of democracy. Besides this, the three works have various other things in common; in the first place there emerges a strong anti-militaristic feeling, or at least a sceptical and critical attitude towards war (the immediate reference in the two tragedies by Euripides is the Trojan war, but for the audience the allusion to the war in progress at that moment must have been obvious). Moreover, all three plays focus on strong female leads, women like Helen, like Lysistrata, or like the Trojan women, who raise their voices in condemnation of the fact that it is always women who are the first victims of any war. Nevertheless, despite these thematic issues in common, the final impression,

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from an artistic perspective, of the various productions of the three plays is very uneven. The director of *Helen*, Davide Livermore, it must be emphasized, staged a ground-breaking, courageous spectacle, totally enthralling the audience from beginning to end with his creation of an imaginary and fantastic atmosphere within which are mingled and overlaid different literary genres, different temporal dimensions and sensory perceptions. But neither the production of *The Trojan Women* by the French director Muriel Mayette-Holtz nor that of *Lysistrata* by Tullio Solenghi could be considered equally successful.

1. *Helen*

Helen is a very unusual tragedy both from the point of view of dramaturgical structure, and from that of the characterization of the protagonists. It must have been disconcerting for the Athenian audiences at the end of the fifth century; certainly the changes in tenor which go from dramatic to comic even reaching the grotesque render it atypical and difficult to place in a specific pigeonhole.¹ It does not correspond in any way to the idea of tragedy elaborated by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, but neither does it meet the requirements of the conventional modern theory of the tragic, which tends towards insoluble conflict and dark, blood-soaked conclusions. The critics have defined it in various ways which go from ‘tragicomedy’ to ‘romantic comedy’, from ‘tragedy of intrigue’ to ‘escape tragedy’. One thing is certain: at centre-stage is the heroine we all know, or at least think we know, Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world, Menelaus’ wife, queen of Sparta, who eloped with Paris and caused the Trojan war. But Euripides proposes an alternative myth to Homer’s celebrated version, one which had already been adopted by the poet Stesichorus,² and the Athenian playwright develops further: Helen never really left for Troy with Paris, she was carried to Egypt by Hermes, by the will of Hera, and placed under the protection of Proteus. An *eidolon* was sent to Troy instead of her, a ghost made of air, an empty simulacrum identical in all ways to the Spartan queen (Eur. *Hel.* 31-6). At the opening of the play, Helen is already in Egypt, the imprisoned guest of king Theoclymenus, successor to the throne of Proteus, and for seventeen years has been waiting for the arrival of her husband Menelaus while remaining faithful to him and resisting the advances of Theoclymenus who wants to marry her. Euripides creates a “new” Helen,³ chaste and innocent, tormented by anguish for her undeserved ill-repute to the point of hating her own beauty, the cause of so much disaster (Eur. *Hel.* 236-7, 262-6). The arrival of Menelaus, shipwrecked off the coast

¹ Perhaps it is because of its composite non-sequential nature that *Helen* has had relatively little fortune on the modern stage. At the Greek Theatre in Syracuse, for example, it had not been staged before now for the last forty years. The last production was in 1978 directed by Roberto Guicciardini, translation by Carlo Diano, protagonist Lydia Alfonsi.

² See fr. 192 and fr. 193 Page. A similar tale, but in a different and more rationalistic form is to be found in Herodotus, 2.112-20. On the ancient variants of the Helen myth see Brillante 2001/02 and Brillante-Bettini 2014.

³ The syntagm τὴν καὶνὴν Ἑλένην, “the new Helen”, or also “the strange Helen”, referring to Euripides’ play appears in Aristophanes, *The Women Celebrating the Thesmophoria*, 850.

of Egypt on his voyage back from Troy, is the first stage of her return home and her redemption in the eyes of the world.

The production of *Helen* at Syracuse by Davide Livermore, well-known for his direction of opera, but here at his first experience of Greek tragedy,⁴ is founded on his awareness of the atypicality of Euripides' text, and of his realization that this allows the director to give free rein to his creative impulse. And there can be no doubt of the fact that he has exploited all the experience he has gained in the field of opera, especially in view of the close analogies between this tragedy and his staging of *Attila* by Giuseppe Verdi that opened the 2018/19 season at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan. These include the lavish use of audio-visual aids and the sophisticated hybridization of the costumes with a conspicuous use of elegant eighteenth-century attire and a scattering of white wigs. In a note which appears in the theatre programme with the title "Do you believe in ghosts?", Livermore writes:

I love *Helen* because it is an unusual tragedy, whose outlines blur into an ironic game; the conclusion seems to taunt people who try to reduce art to a list of categories constrained within the pedantic obedience of cast-iron rules. No-one dies in *Helen*. And they smile rather as they do in Elizabethan tragedies, which actually seem a bit distant to us, despite our intellectual effort, because they let the components of tragedy and comedy coexist, without anatomizing life and its qualities, in a way which is to us somehow a little too individual, free ... English. Perhaps for this, too, *Helen* has not been performed for the last forty years because it does not correspond to the expectations of the sort of criticism that loves to put labels on things, but rather demands that the critics themselves remain unbiassed, open to the acceptance of another dimension, perhaps simply to being modern. (Livermore 2019: 30)⁵

The most spectacular feature of Livermore's staging is without doubt the transformation of the circular orchestra of the Teatro Greco of Syracuse into an enor-

⁴ *Helen* by Euripides, director Davide Livermore, Italian translation Walter Lapini, scenic project Davide Livermore, costumes Gianluca Falaschi, music Andrea Chenna, lighting Antonio Castro, cast: Laura Marinoni (Helen), Viola Marietti (Teucer), Sax Nicosia (Menelaus), Mariagrazia Solano (Old Woman), Simonetta Cartia (Theonoe), Giancarlo Judica Cordiglia (Theoclymenus), Linda Gennari and Maria Chiara Centorami (Messengers), Federica Quartana (Coryphaeus), Bruno Di Chiara, Marcello Gravina, Django Guerzoni, Giancarlo Latina, Silvio Laviano, Turi Moricca, Vladimir Randazzo and Marouane Zotti (Chorus and Dioscuri), students of the Accademia d'arte del dramma antico della Fondazione Inda (Chorus). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, May 9th 2019. The performance was repeated 13-14 September 2019 at the Teatro Romano at Verona: owing to the evident difference in space between the stage in Verona and the enormous orchestra of the Teatro Greco in Syracuse, it was necessary to carry out a series of adaptations in the staging and a complete rethinking of the production.

⁵ "Amo *Elena* perché è una tragedia atipica, da contorni che sfumano in un giuoco ironico; il finale poi sembra irridere coloro che cercano di fare dell'arte un elenco di categorie che debbano pedantemente rispondere a regole fisse. In *Elena* non si muore. E si sorride come nelle tragedie elisabettiane, che in fondo ci risultano sempre un po' lontane nonostante i nostri sforzi intellettuali, perché capaci di lasciare convivere le componenti del tragico e del comico, capaci di non vivisezionare la vita e le sue componenti in un modo un po' troppo laico, libero ... inglese. Forse anche per questo *Elena* non viene rappresentata da oltre quattro decenni, perché non risponde a nessuna aspettativa della critica che etichetta, ma chiede a chi critica di essere libero da attese, aperto ad accettare un altro livello, forse semplicemente moderno."

mous piscina, a lake that becomes the stage. This is an evocative background for the movements both of the actors and also of the props, the rusted wreck of Menelaus' ship (in Livermore's re-creation this becomes a nineteenth-century English brig with a broken mainmast), which the king of Sparta drags behind him laboriously on the end of a rope, Helen's remote-controlled armchair which she uses to move about the stage, the over-stylized altar to Proteus, a harp and various other things. Besides symbolizing the sea, the body of water provides a key towards the interpretation of *Helen*: it is the storehouse of memory where recollections of the past accumulate; every so often they re-emerge, bringing with them the flotsam and jetsam of the myth. It is a mirror in which Helen regards her image, an essential element in a drama which plays upon the idea of the double.⁶ Furthermore,



Fig. 1: Helen (Laura Marinoni) and the Chorus. Photo Franca Centaro/AFI Siracusa

the water acts as a haunting musical instrument which interacts with the actors' movements through sensors which transform these movements into fountains of harmonious sound. The correspondence between image and music is a vital part of this spectacle; Andrea Chenna arranged his score as a collage in which his original music, composed especially for the play, is mingled with the sounds produced by the underwater sensors and with passages from Ravel, Boccherini, Mozart and Bellini. This potpourri, or patchwork, of different melodies accompanies and sustains the sudden fluctuations of style effected during the staging.

As a background there towers a huge screen of 60 square metres on which appear for the whole duration of the play images of tempest-tossed seas, skies over-

⁶ See Fusillo 1997.

cast by leaden clouds, often split by sudden lightning. These images, expressing the primordial strength of nature, alternate with depictions of an aged Helen, caught in close-up with white hair and a wrinkled face, giving the idea that the whole story represented on the stage is nothing but reminiscence on the part of the protagonist, who has already experienced these happenings and now re-evokes the past by giving her own version of it. But onstage, Helen is young and fascinating. When the play opens she appears with a black veil over her face (perhaps to suggest her condition as the hapless victim of divine will), and while she moves from place to place on a remote-controlled floating armchair she tells the story of her life, despairing for the ill-repute that sullies her fair name (Fig.1). The Helen revisited by Livermore is a woman who is carrying on an interior dialogue with herself, one who has reached a crossroads in her life, having just concluded one of the stages of her existence and is now searching for a key to her own identity. She no longer wants to be a seductive *femme fatale*, but a faithful wife awaiting her husband's return.⁷ The actor



Fig. 2: Menelaus (Sax Nicosia) and his shipwreck. Photo Bianca Burgo/AFI Siracusa

Laura Marinoni is at home in the part of a Helen who fluctuates between resignation and the urge to fight back, between suffering and lightness of heart, between despair and parody. Occasionally, however, her acting tends towards an exaggerated verbal emphasis where there is no real need for this. Sax Nicosia, in the part of the shipwrecked Menelaus, adopts a more suitably restrained style, though full of self-assurance and pride, in his long red overcoat, army boots, and the wreck of his ship

⁷ Euripides' aim here to redeem Helen's reputation, which had been blackened unjustly through a betrayal that she had not perpetrated and a war that she had not caused, is the same that moves the orator Gorgias when he writes his *Encomium of Helen* at about the same time.

that he does not want to abandon. Livermore's Menelaus is never a straightforward *miles gloriosus*, not even when he relates the heroic deeds of Troy, but neither is he a degraded and humiliated figure, unable to find his way or realize what is happening. On the contrary, he seems to have his own existential dimension: he is a man who wishes he had never been born, in the throes of despair, amazed at the ordeals he has had to undergo and that he is still having to endure, but he never complains, conscious always of his glorious history as a warlord. From this perspective the director openly parts company with a certain sort of interpretation that persists in the degradation of the hero as a characteristic of Euripides' dramaturgy.

The recognition scene between Helen and Menelaus signals the turning-point in the dramatic action. It is a key scene whose significance is archetypal when compared with many agnition scenes typical of later theatre. The director seems almost to have ignored the difference evinced by the husband and wife in their relative ability to understand,⁸ but concentrates on the aspects of the melodramatic duet which already seem implicit in Euripides' text. Livermore's direction concludes the agnition scene with a passionate kiss that Helen plants on the mouth of a bewildered Menelaus as the ultimate proof of her love and fidelity. From this moment on the play veers once and for all in the direction of romantic comedy or melodrama. The Chorus that until now were clothed from head to toe in the black garments of mourning throw these off to reveal themselves bare-chested in long black skirts, and dance around carrying silver candelabra and goblets of spumante. They move gracefully, with stylized gestures, fluctuating between courtly decorum and joyous abandon. The solution adopted by Livermore for the Chorus – notorious for being the most difficult testing ground for the staging of Greek tragedy – is all contained within his intended re-visitation of opera. Instead of the Greek prisoners held in Egypt (as in Euripides) the director invents strange, ambiguous figures, somewhat androgynous, rather perturbing and very surreal.

The minor characters as well are subject to an original portrayal. Theoclymenus, for example (here interpreted splendidly by Giancarlo Judica Cordiglia), a personage who is usually considered to be an unscrupulous Eastern sovereign, an arrogant, dull-witted despot, who does not live up to the ethical values of his father Proteus, appears in this production as a king in love, transformed into a powdered cicisbeo in the costume of an eighteenth-century ruler, fragile, over-indulged and slightly effeminate. He allows himself to be deceived by the astute Greek couple, and although he threatens his sister Theonoe, who has betrayed him, with the death sentence, in the end he surrenders immediately, offering no resistance to the exhortations of the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux, and accepts his fate with resignation. Simonetta Cartia's interpretation of Theonoe, the Egyptian king's sister, was also effective. Theonoe is a prophetess who knows the truth of things and has no hesitation in putting this knowledge at the service of just causes, even at the cost of going against her own and her family's interests. Euripides projects on to this 'holy' figure a positive ideal of religious feeling in the context of a controversy that in the play has to do particularly with mantic wisdom, accused of being fallible and mendacious (Eur. *Hel.* 744–57) and also against a background of epochal doubt when even faith in the gods was

⁸ See on this subject Mureddu 2005.

called into question.⁹ Livermore makes Theonoe wear the large wig of a court lady and conveys the idea of her divine afflatus through a soprano voice, cast upon the panorama of heavenly bodies we see hurtling across the giant screen, and torrents of ritual incense that accompany her progress (Eur. *Hel.* 865-72).

By fully exploiting Walter Lapini's precise linear translation, which was carried out with the idea of being utilized on the stage, Livermore has succeeded in projecting Euripides' play into a fantastic, atemporal dreamworld, in which ancient, neoclassical-eighteenth-century and modern elements (among the latter, the besom broom used by the palace servant, and the unexpected cigarette) are jumbled together in no apparent order. With such an approach it seems to go without saying that the political dimension of the drama, that at Euripides' time must have been very apparent, in particular from the point of view of antimilitarism and anti-war-mongering, hardly comes across at all.¹⁰ The scene with Teucer (Eur. *Hel.* 68-163), for example, that in the original play has an emblematic value in that it serves to illustrate the disastrous consequences of the Trojan war on someone like Teucer, a Greek soldier overwhelmed by events through no fault of his own (he lost his brother Ajax, was disowned by his father, and was forced to flee with no possessions to found a new realm). In Livermore's production he takes on a new significance. The role is played by a woman (Viola Marietti), who is dressed exactly like Helen to the point that she seems the mirror image of the Spartan queen. This is clearly meant as an underscoring of the theme of the double (the two women lift up a mirror between them), almost as if Teucer is nothing but the reflection of Helen's consciousness, an oneiric projection of her guilty conscience.

Even so, there is at least one clearly political moment to be met with in Livermore's *Helen*. When the old serving-woman in Theoclymenus' palace drives king Menelaus away so unkindly, as he is reduced to beggary after being shipwrecked on the coast of Egypt, she tells him to go somewhere else, and explains to him, "Here, in our country, the harbours are closed!"¹¹ and it is of no use for the Spartan king to object "But I am the survivor of a shipwreck and such victims are sacred"¹² referring to the Pan-Hellenic *nomos*, a custom that stipulated the duty to succour the shipwrecked. This exchange of words had a particular significance for the audience

⁹ See Eur. *Hel.* 1137-42: ὅ τι θεὸς ἢ μὴ θεὸς ἢ τὸ μέσον / τίς φησ' ἐρευνήσας βροτῶν / μακρότατον πέρας εὑρεῖν / ὃς τὰ θεῶν ἐσορᾷ / δεῦρο καὶ αὖθις ἐκείῃσιν / καὶ πάλιν ἀντιλόγοις / πηδῶντ' ἀνελπίστοις τύχαις; ("What is god, or what is not god, or what is in between – what mortal says he has found it by searching the farthest limit, when he sees divine affairs leaping here and there again and back, in contradictory and unexpected chances?"). All the passages from *Helen* are quoted from Murray's edition (Euripides 1902) and from the translation by E.P. Coleridge (Euripides 1938).

¹⁰ "We suffered in vain for the sake of a cloud?" (νεφέλης ἄρ' ἄλλως εἶχομεν πόνους πέρι; Menelaus' disillusioned old trooper asks himself v. 706; "You are fools, who try to win a reputation for virtue through war and marshalled lines of spears, senselessly putting an end to mortal troubles" (ἄφρονες ὅσοι τὰς ἀρετὰς πολέμῳ / λόγχασι τ' ἀλκαίου δορὸς / κτᾶσθε, πόνους ἀμαθῶς θνα- / τῶν καταπαυόμενοι), the Chorus sings at vv. 1151-4. The antimilitaristic reading is the one most preferred in modern re-interpretations of the Helen myth. See above all the poem *Helen* by Giorgios Seferis, Nobel Prize for Literature 1963.

¹¹ "Qui da noi i porti sono chiusi!".

¹² "Ma io sono un naufrago e il naufrago è sacro".

at Syracuse: the pertinence to the present state of affairs in the Mediterranean and the various political disputes triggered a visible reaction and prolonged applause.¹³ In this case Livermore deliberately interpolates Lapini's translation, but without disturbing Euripides' meaning in the original, where, indeed, the tragedian writes (449-50):

ΜΕ. ναυαγὸς ἦκω ξένος, ἀσύλητον γένος.

ΓΕ. οἶκον πρὸς ἄλλον νῦν τιν' ἀντὶ τοῦδ' ἴθι.

[MEN. Come as a shipwrecked man and a guest; such people are safe from violence. OLD WOMAN Well, go to some other house instead of this one.]

The final sequence is remarkable. It is another interpolation by Livermore, this time with no equivalent in Euripides, but one that clinches the director's interpretation and provides an oneiric hermeneutical key. After the epiphany of the Dioscuri (Marcello Gravina and Vladimir Randazzo), *dei ex machina*, dressed in long white robes glittering with sequins, and their announcement of the future destiny of Menelaus and Helen, the stage/lake or at this point, perhaps, sea that swallows up its shipwrecked victims, is dyed red like the blood shed in war. Suddenly we realize – this is the interpretative perspective offered – that the whole story is simply the reminiscing of a Helen who is already old and who has relived her adventures in a long flashback. One at a time every one of the characters who has appeared on the stage dies, and only the aged Helen remains, with her rapidly fading memories. The lake now becomes a marsh of stygian darkness into which sink the bodies of the dead and with them their memories, too. It may be that Davide Livermore derived this intelligent and fascinating idea for his staging of the text from the pages of Lucian of Samosata, the 2nd century AD writer who was the first one to reflect, through the paradigm of Helen's beauty, upon the transience of the human condition,¹⁴ or from those of the Greek poet Ghiannis Ritsos who, in 1970, wrote a drama entitled *Helen*, a long monologue in which the aged Queen, during the last days of her life cared for by insolent handmaids, tells an anonymous guest of her memories of youth and the few things that remain to her.¹⁵ In this way the unexpected final sequence reiterates the questions asked of the spectator at the beginning of this and every play: is what has been seen on the stage true or false? Is this the story that really happened or is it the projection of a mind clouded by the mists of time, of old age? The question remains unanswered, as a mournful, poignant lament accompanies the last movements of a Helen more fragile than ever, alone and forsaken.

¹³ It is curious that in this case it is a Greek victim of shipwreck, a westerner, who is refused shelter in an African harbour – exactly the opposite of what is happening in the world today.

¹⁴ See Lucian of Samosata, *True Story*, 2.25-6 and *Dialogues of the Dead*, 18.

¹⁵ *Helen* by Ritsos is included with other poems in the collection *The Fourth Dimension* (English translation Ritsos 1993). On the use of mythological paradigms in Ritsos' poetry see Chambers 1992.

2 *The Trojan Women*

The strong point of *The Trojan Women*¹⁶ staged by the French director Muriel Mayette-Holtz – at her first experience with a Greek tragedy, but otherwise a tried and tested member of her profession (she was the first woman to direct the prestigious Comédie Française) – is the scene project curated by the Milanese architect Stefano Boeri, who had 300 tree-trunks transported to Syracuse from a forest in Carnia, in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region, where they had been uprooted by a natural disaster in October 2018. The entire orchestra of the Greek Theatre thus appears as a ‘dead wood’ a spectral forest of denuded, devastated trees, with no branches and with no leaves, a clear symbol of destruction and calamity. This will be the background to the staging of the drama which recounts the desolation of the women of Troy, the suffering of the vanquished, of the mothers deprived of their children, of women in flight from war and poverty.

This is the fourth time that *The Trojan Women* has been staged in Syracuse (the preceding performances were in 1952, 1974 and 2004). It is indeed one of the most harrowing and one of the most choral in ancient theatre: Euripides stigmatizes the unjust violence of the victorious compared with the composed dignity of the vanquished, here focussing on the fate of the women of Troy who after the end of the hostilities are waiting hopelessly for the arrival of their doom as future slaves. On the apocalyptic scene, a sort of “day after”, referred to above, to which a desertification of feeling corresponds on the moral plane, the echo of cannonades and thunderous explosions – the typical sounds of war – signal the opening of the play with the prologue spoken by Poseidon (Massimo Cimaglia) and Athena (Francesca Ciocchetti): the first laments the fall of Troy, whose unyielding walls he himself had built, the second, though siding with the Greeks, feels hurt by the fact that Cassandra, one of her priestesses, had been snatched roughly from her temple. For this Athena vows she will cause the Achaean army to suffer a difficult and dangerous journey home. The two divine figures are represented according to a traditional iconographic scheme, Poseidon garbed in a chiton and Athena in a peplum, with lance and helmet, but the characterization of the 45 women who make up the Chorus is a completely different matter. They are wearing shapeless grey tunics, and are covered in white dust, hands and hair included: an appearance reminiscent of the catastrophe of 9/11.¹⁷

¹⁶ *The Trojan Women* by Euripides, director Muriel Mayette-Holtz, Italian translation Alessandro Grilli, scenic project Stefano Boeri, costumes Marcella Salvo, music Cyril Giroux, lighting Angelo Linzalata, cast: Massimo Cimaglia (Poseidon), Francesca Ciocchetti (Athena), Maddalena Crippa (Hecuba), Elena Polic Greco (Chorus leader), Clara Galante (Coryphaeus), Paolo Rossi (Talthybius), Marial Bajama Riva (Cassandra), Elena Arvigo (Andromache), Riccardo Scalia (Astyanax), Graziano Piazza (Menelaus), Viola Graziosi (Helen), Fiammetta Poidomani (Guitarist), students of the Accademia d'arte del dramma antico della Fondazione Inda (Chorus). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, May 10th 2019.

¹⁷ See the interview with Muriel Mayette-Holtz where she says “In my imagination I started with the pictures of 11 September when the victims and the people who were trying to help them looked just the same. Covered in dust that eradicated any difference. The colour of the ground had disappeared and the only thing left was a dirty remainder of the original colour immersed in

At the centre of the tragedy is the queen, Hecuba, played by Maddalena Crippa, the widow of Priam who, with her sombre eloquence expresses all her unspeakable suffering and with courage and dignity tries to hearten the other Trojan women who have been enslaved by the Greeks. Crippa, who has appeared several times at Syracuse as protagonist, manages to give this character, who ultimately represents the doom of all the women of her city, the fitting degree of *pathos*, especially in



Fig. 3: Hecuba (Maddalena Crippa), Andromache (Elena Arvigo), Astyanax (Riccardo Scalia), and the Chorus of the Trojan Women. Photo Franca Centaro/AFI Siracusa

the soliloquies in which the Trojan queen gives voice to her despair but counsels hope (Fig. 3). Particularly in the soliloquy uttered before the body of little Astyanax, placed upon his father Hector's shield, Hecuba best expresses her awareness of the necessity to cling to dignity even at the moments at which misfortune is strongest.

a uniform grey, almost like a memory of life in death, a memory of colour" ("Nel mio immaginario sono partita dalle immagini dell'11 settembre quando le vittime e quelli che provavano ad aiutare le vittime erano uguali fra loro. Sotto la polvere che annullava le differenze. Il colore della terra era sparito e rimaneva solo lo sporcarsi delle tinte originarie immerse nel grigio uniforme, quasi ricordo di vita nella morte, un ricordo di colore") (Giliberti-Faraci 2019: 36-7).

The Trojan noblewomen are not the only ones, however, whose faces are smeared with dust and muddled with clay as a sign of misery and ostracism: the cruel Achaeans, the victors of the war, are also covered with the same dirty, whitish dust. This because the director did not want to distinguish between victors and vanquished, in the sense that, in the last analysis, at the end of a war both sides come out of it defeated in some way. Talthybius, the cynical Greek herald who intervenes to announce the fate of the Trojan women prisoners, is portrayed, it must be admitted, in a manner which is unnecessarily alienating. Paolo Rossi, the actor who plays him, a specialist in decidedly comic parts, has from the beginning a puckish air, wild-eyed and crafty. His intention seems that of interpreting the common soldier, hardened by the many years of war that have numbed his sensibilities to the point that he has no pity for the victims. But his way of expressing this provokes humour more than it induces participation.

The fundamental shortcoming of this production is caused by the significant extraneity between the stage project and Euripides' text,¹⁸ even though the version used is Alessandro Grilli's excellent Italian translation. As a result, the performance is hardly ever able to fully express the play's intrinsic *pathos*. A glaring example of this tendency is the *agon* between Hecuba and Helen (895-1059), the key moment of the play and a sort of judicial contest to establish who really caused the war: the debate between the two sides is entrusted simply to the words of the script without any support on the part of the staging. Cassandra's scene is also not very convincing: here the physical fragility of the actor Marial Bama Riva lends the character the exaggerated appearance of ill-health (Fig. 4). More than a prophetess, Cassandra



Fig. 4: Cassandra (Marial Bajma Riva). Photo Bianca Burgo/AFI Siracusa

¹⁸ See on this subject the opinion of Sotera Fornaro, who justly remarks on the gap between the symbolic value of the set and the content of the acting, and comments that the scenery "could serve as a background to absolutely any contemporary catastrophe play" (Fornaro 2019).

seems hysterical, incapable of self-control. She performs a wild, convulsive dance on the stage to celebrate her imminent marriage to Agamemnon, by whom she will be violated. Perhaps the director wanted to emphasize the Dionysian component to which Euripides' text refers (Eur. *Tro.* 341, 359), that is, the moment of prophetic delirium. But the way in which the scene is performed eliminates every trace of sacrality from the character who, moreover, from a certain point of the action, after her delirium, fully regains her reason and speaks in a rational manner.¹⁹

Mayette-Holtz's staging is extremely understated, which in itself would not be a bad thing, but a greater creative vitality is needed to retain the attention of the audience. The moments where the director dares to be more inventive are certainly to be preferred. This happens for example towards the end of the play, when the Trojan women divest themselves of their heavy grey coats to decorate the tomb of Astyanax, and all reveal that beneath these they are dressed in red shifts, while at the same time behind the scenes can be made out the torches that are lighting the last fires of Troy, which at this point has finally fallen into the hands of the Achaeans. The symbolism of the colour red, blood and fire, is evident.

The aim of the scene project is that of celebrating women who are the victims of war because – as Muriel Mayette-Holtz has explained – “Women are the real heroines of war. They are left alone and try to build everything up again beneath the dust of destruction. War lets no-one win: no-one is the victor. But, fortunately, we have women so we can begin again. They are the strongest on earth.”²⁰ It is improbable that this was what Euripides was thinking of when he put on *The Trojan Women* at the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens: only a few months after the defeat and suppression of Melos (416 BC), this play seems more to be the tragedian's statement against the violent excesses of Athenian imperialism. But it does not really matter what Euripides' real intentions were, even if it were possible to discover them. A contemporary director has every right to opt for a feminist interpretation of the play, may certainly compare the dignity of the enslaved women to the indolence of men like Menelaus, incapable of putting an end to the tragedy of the war. S/he may also suggest a similarity between the lot of the Trojan women and that of countless women today who, in wars taking place now or that have happened in the recent past (in Bosnia, Syria and many other places), are being imprisoned, killed, wounded or raped. But to lend reality to these ideas it would have been necessary to attempt a much more pioneering and compelling production, in which the different degrees and forms of grief experienced by Hecuba, Cassandra, Andromache and Helen were taken into account. The sensation is that the interpretative perspective in which predominates the fact that women are the main victims and at the same time the first ones to react and get on with things loses sight of the complex play of nuances which Euripides' dramaturgy creates.

¹⁹ See Di Benedetto 1971: 24ff.

²⁰ See Mallamo 2019.

3. *Lysistrata*

The comedy *Lysistrata*, which Aristophanes put on in 411 BC is a classic example of the theme ‘women against war’; in fact it is perhaps the play of all others in ancient theatre where the opposition of women to military conflict is best thematised.²¹ Nine years after the last performance at the Greek Theatre at Syracuse (with Emiliani Bronzini as director), the new *Lysistrata* was entrusted to Tullio Solenghi who decided to use Giulio Guidorizzi’s Italian translation so that the production would be lively and vigorous, maintaining all the comic vitality of the original and adopting the same devices as Aristophanes used to realize his art: innuendo, bawdy jokes, obscene gags, that are not only carried out but are also, more often than not, improved upon. The resulting performance is on the whole quite satisfactory, even if there are occasional moments of crass trivialization, such as the long – and inventive – list of expressions to describe both male and female genitals not to mention the verbs which indicate sexual intercourse.²²

At centre stage is Lysistrata, the Athenian woman who decides to muster the women of other Greek cities and convince them to activate a sex strike whose aim is that of forcing their men to sign a peace treaty and put an end to war (the name Lysistrata literally means “she who disbands armies”). The lead character is played by the actor Elisabetta Pozzi, whose main area of expertise is tragedy, but is also convincing in the role of Lysistrata (Fig. 5). She brings into being a Lysistrata who is uneasy and discerning, who is apt to lose her temper, who knows how to reason and how to persuade. She is the one who leads the Greek women to capture the Acropolis: the women go up to the High City and seize the place which represents the summit of power and where the money for financing war and the wood for ship-building are kept. She it is, with her reasoning and her exhortations, who assigns to the younger women the difficult task of turning the aggressive instinct into an erotic instinct by denying the men the pleasure of sex so as to force them to make peace. The dramatic expedients utilized to make this *Lysistrata* enjoyable are many and various: the most noteworthy being the idea to make the characters speak in different Italian dialects (Sicilian, Neapolitan, Venetian, Apulian, Genoese, Tuscan) so as

²¹ *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes, director Tullio Solenghi, Italian translation Giulio Guidorizzi, scenic project and costumes Andrea Viotti, music Marcello Cotugno, choreography Paola Maffioletti, lighting Pietro Sperduti, cast: Elisabetta Pozzi (Lysistrata), Federica Carruba Toscano (Calonice), Giovanna Di Rauso (Myrrhine), Viola Marietti (Lampito), Federico Vanni (Magistrate), Tullio Solenghi (Cinesias), Roberto Alinghieri (Didascalio), Massimo Lopez (Pedasta), Simonetta Cartia (Oracle), students of the Accademia d’arte del dramma antico della Fondazione Inda (Chorus). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, Juny, 28th 2019.

²² Margherita Rubino rightly remarks that “the vocabulary referring to sex was something the Greeks in general found amusing, it tickled the public’s sense of humour and raised the odd burst of laughter, but it absolutely did not pack the subversive punch that certain periods of history, notably the English nineteenth-century, conceded it” (“Il lessico che fa riferimento al sesso otteneva tra i Greci un assenso divertito, solleticava il pubblico, suscitava qualche risata, ma non aveva assolutamente la carica eversiva che certe epoche della storia, come l’Ottocento inglese per fare un esempio, gli riservano”) (Rubino 2019: 54).



Fig 5: Lysistrata (Elisabetta Pozzi), and the other Greek women.
Photo Franca Centaro/AFI Siracusa

to replicate the different idioms of the Greek cities. The costumes are also differentiated according to where the characters come from: the Spartan women, for example, athletes and soldiers, enter dressed in red bikinis, like the classic iconography of the mosaics of the Villa Romana del Casale at Piazza Armerina (Fig. 6). The beginning of the dramatic action on stage is preceded by a parade of war-orphans – just as took place in classical Athens at the beginning of the festival of the Great Dionysia – and at once this constitutes a tangible introduction to the theme of the disasters caused by war. Another addition that does not appear in the original text is that of the character Didascalio (Roberto Arlinghieri), a sort of elderly bearded professor who stays on the edge of the orchestra and every so often takes the floor to explain to the audience the meaning of various difficult terms or unclear references: a metatheatrical gag which is intelligently handled and adds to the comic drive of the action.

The way in which Solenghi approaches Aristophanes' text is totally free and almost irreverent. Another character who is a complete invention is Pedasta, a moustached woman played by Massimo Lopez, who comes on stage in sequined robes and feathers, reminding one of Wanda Osiris, and sings Frank Sinatra's *My Way*. This cabaret number, which is utterly defamiliarizing, inserted abruptly into the action, must have caused the director not a little remorse, and in fact he invents a live phone call from Aristophanes in person who complains from the other world about this unwarranted abuse of his work.

The scene and the costumes by Andrea Viotti are for the most part brightly coloured (with a prevalence of red and yellow) and seem to refer to a version of African dress. The Acropolis is dominated by an evocative statue of the Great Mother (instead of the one of the goddess Athena), and on the left, by a shiny oracular totem. The sense



Fig. 6: Lampito (Viola Marietti) and Lysistrata (Elisabetta-Pozzi).
Photo Franca-Centaro/AFI Siracusa

of these objects is not really clear: perhaps they refer to the contemporary emergency of the African migrants, in the first place victims of war, who are seeking desperately to land on the coasts of Europe. At a certain point the remark can be heard from the stage of one of the characters invoking the need for peace “how loud those poor devils are screaming to us for help from the sea”: this is not in Aristophanes’ text, but similar references to contemporary events were perfectly in line with the spirit of his dramatic technique.

Generally speaking, Solenghi’s staging comes out as rather too overworked. Fewer gags would have given it greater intensity and elegance. The scene of the oracle represented as an electric totem in the form of an eastern divinity that lights up and speaks in an incomprehensible code is inappropriate and could have been left out. Among the most unconvincing things of the performance is the over-rhetorical epilogue at the end (a sort of interpolated *parabasis*) where Lysistrata, in a soliloquy, takes on the role of spokeswoman of the thoughts of a small boy, Leandro (Riccardo Scalia), the soldier of tomorrow. Now he is living in peace, but he will be trained for war, he will be a warrior, he too will abandon his woman and his children, he will be educated within the totally masculine logic of power. In other words, peace is a momentary conquest which must be nourished and guarded, otherwise it will only be a stage preceding another war.²³ This sudden fervent upsurge of pacifist and feminist

²³ The soliloquy is drawn from a text by Simone Savogin in the book *Scriverò finché avrò voce*

pathos contradicts the entire spirit of Aristophanes' comedy; it gives the impression of a contrived 'moral of the story' of which there was absolutely no need. The didactic intention and aspiration towards civic duty in a way almost suffocates the comic urge of *Lysistrata*, which in itself is not at all a proto-feminist work,²⁴ neither is it that hymn to peace at any price that many people think it is.²⁵ In any case Aristophanes certainly did not advocate the equality of the sexes, an inconceivable idea in Ancient Greece, but he amused himself in constructing, for purely satirical reasons, a reversed, topsy-turvy world in which the women take the political initiative to the point of plotting a fully-fledged coup d'état. The Greek scholar Giulio Guidorizzi is absolutely right when he says, in a note accompanying his translation:

A female rebellion? Of course. But not a violent rebellion: none of the women in *Lysistrata* resemble an angry feminist of the Seventies, none of them hate men because they are males . . . *Lysistrata* describes a coup d'état: the women take over the Acropolis and force the men to bring about peace. All's well that ends well: now everything will go back to normal: the war will end, the women will return home to their men and go back to seducing them and dominating them with their wiles. But nothing, beyond this, will have changed. Certainly this is a feminist comedy, but it only goes halfway: the means which Lysistrata and the other women adopt to act upon the men are the traditional ones of seduction and sexuality. Power, apart from that of the marriage bed, stays in masculine hands: and the last words of the comedy are given to the men who are celebrating. (Guidorizzi 2019: 106)²⁶

Translation by Susan Payne

(Milan: Tre60).

²⁴ Solenghi in the Syracuse theatre programme notes calls *Lysistrata* "the first real heroine of female emancipation" and of the occupation of the Acropolis staged in the comedy as "the first intrepid example of female government" (Solenghi 2019: 30). But this representation of a world overturned and absurd does not correspond in any way to a desire or hope of the Athenian comic dramatist; the women are in point of fact the first objects of satirical derision on his part.

²⁵ For an idea of the significance of *Lysistrata* seen against the historical events of 411 BC in Athens, in particular the Oligarchic Coup of that year and a political interpretation of the comedy in a pro-Spartan key see Canfora 2017: 85-138.

²⁶ "Ribellione delle donne? Certo. Ma non è una ribellione feroce: nessuna donna nella *Lysistrata* assomiglia a una femminista arrabbiata degli anni Settanta, nessuna di loro odia i maschi per il fatto che sono maschi . . . La *Lysistrata* descrive un colpo di stato: le donne occupano l'Acropoli e obbligano i maschi a concludere la pace. Tutto è bene ciò che finisce bene: ora ogni cosa rientrerà nell'ordine consueto, la guerra finirà, le donne torneranno a casa dai loro uomini e riprenderanno a sedurli e a dominarli col loro fascino. Ma nulla, oltre a questo, sarà cambiato. Certamente è una commedia femminista, ma a metà: i mezzi con cui *Lysistrata* e le altre agiscono sui maschi sono quelli, tradizionali, della seduzione e della sessualità. Il potere, a parte quello dei talami, resterà ai maschi: le ultime parole della commedia sono affidate ai maschi che festeggiano".

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