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Edited by Eric Nicholson

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GHERARDO UGOLINI*

When Heroism is Female. Heracles at Syracuse

Abstract

Among the plays staged at the 54th Festival of Greek Theatre at Syracuse (14 may-8 july 2018) the event that attracted the greatest attention was Emma Dante's production of the *Heracles* of Euripides. The Sicilian director proposed an innovative and subjective revisiting of the play without upsetting the sense of the Greek original. The staging makes use of an alternation of registers and styles, from the pathetic to the grotesque, from the tragic to the humorous, besides diversifying musical and choreographic modes. The aim is that of showing up the extreme fragility of the protagonist, compelled to regress from the glory of his heroic achievements to a destiny of suffering. In order to focus on this fragility Emma Dante assigns all the male roles (Lycus, Heracles, Amphitryon, Theseus and the Messenger) to female actors, thus provocatively reversing the codes of ancient Greek theatre.

KEYWORDS: Euripides; Thebes; Syracuse; Greek tragedy; Emma Dante

Emma Dante's staging of Euripides' *Heracles*¹ was definitely the production that most successfully captured the audience's and the critics' attention at the 54th Festival of Greek Theatre at Syracuse, which was held at the Greek theatre of Syracuse from the 10 May to the 8 July 2018. Traditionally the Syracusan performances of the INDA (National Institute of Ancient Drama) tend to maintain a fair amount of fidelity to the original text and a reassuring conventionality in the staging. But it is sometimes the case that the keys to the production are entrusted to directors who have made experimentalism and innovation the bywords of their reputation and who therefore take up the option of a complete renewal both of the theatrical conventions and of the fundamental implications of the ancient plays that they put on the stage. Born in Palermo, Emma Dante, actor, playwright and director both of plays and films, has returned to Greek tragedy 15 years after her staging of *Medea* (2003) with Iaia Forte and Tommaso Ragno, to confront the text of *Heracles* without the least fear or reverence and has transformed Euripides'

¹ *Heracles* by Euripides, director Emma Dante, Italian translation Giorgio Ieranò, costumes Vanessa Sannino, scenes Carmine Maringola, music Serena Ganci, choreography Manuela Lo Sico, lighting Christian Zucaro, cast: Mariagiulia Colace (Heracles), Serena Barone (Amphitryon), Naike Anna Silipo (Megara), Patricia Zanco (Lycus), Carlotta Viscovo (Theseus), Francesca Laviosa (Eris), Arianna Pozzoli (Lyssa and one of Heracles' children), Katia Mirabella (Messenger), Samuel Salamone (Coryphaeus), Sena Lippi and Isabella Sciortino (Heracles' children), students of the Accademia d'arte del dramma antico della Fondazione Inda (Chorus). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, May 10 2018. The production was repeated at the Teatro Grande at Pompeii (19 and 23 July 2018) and at the Roman Theatre in Verona (14 and 15 September 2018).

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late fifth century BC play in a totally innovative and subjective re-interpretation, which, however, does not disrupt the sense of the Greek original.²

The choice of the three plays for the 2018 edition – *Heracles* by Euripides, *Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles³ and *The Knights* by Aristophanes⁴ – in the minds of the organizers of the Syracusan Festival, was intended to generate a clearly political meaning. As the Festival’s artistic director Roberto Andò wrote, in a note published in the theatre programme entitled “The Scene of Power”:

The titles of the two tragedies and of the comedy trace . . . the protean visage of the hero and the tyrant in the ancient world and describe the tragic escalation, the psychic derailment and the possible degeneration into farce. (Andò 2018: 7)⁵

The philologist Luciano Canfora, in his definition of the ‘concept’ behind the Festival’s programme, identifies the scarlet thread linking the three plays as the “metaphor of power” which

is the metaphor of life itself, it is the moral fable that obliges us to reflect upon the fragility of human destiny, upon its enigmatic and often irrational mutability. This is the essence of the tangle of existential paradoxes – positive and negative – confronting each and every hero in Greek tragedy. The biographies of the tyrants of Greek history are coloured by the crucial features of the biographies of the heroes of myth: a childhood on the margins of society, predestination, occasionally marked by some physical and/or moral deformity, an important marriage and social rise, heroic deeds of conquest and the founding of cities, fall from power and remarkable death – in short, disproportion and disharmony, which result in the impulse towards contradiction and excess. For better or for worse. In this way hero and antihero become two sides of the same coin, two faces of the same person: it is thus that in Greek tragedy the tyrant becomes a Titanic figure in his greatness, but his prestige and power rebound, above all, against him, far beyond his own intent. In the end he is

² Other plays directed by Emma Dante and inspired by Ancient Greek mythology are *Alceste* (2007), *Verso Medea* (2014), *Odissea A/R*, (2015) and *Io, Nessuno e Polifemo* (2015).

³ Director Yannis Kokkos, Italian translation Federico Condello, scenes Yannis Kokkos, music Alexandros Markeas, costumes Paola Mariani, lighting Giuseppe Di Iorio, cast: Massimo De Francovich (Oedipus), Roberta Caronia (Antigone), Eleonora De Luca (Ismene), Sebastiano Lo Monaco (Theseus), Stefano Santospago (Creon), Fabrizio Falco (Polyneices), Danilo Nigrelli (Messenger), Sergio Mancinelli (Foreigner), Davide Sbrogiò (Coryphaeus), students of the Accademia d’arte del dramma antico della Fondazione Inda (Chorus). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, May 11 2018. The production was repeated at the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus (17 and 18 August 2018).

⁴ Director Giampiero Solari, Italian translation Olimpia Imperio, scenes Angelo Linzalata, costumes Daniela Cernigliaro, music Roy Paci, cast: Francesco Pannofino (Sausage-Seller), Gigio Alberti (Paphlagonian/Cleon), Roy Paci (Coryphaeus), Antonio Catania (Demos), students of the Accademia d’arte del dramma antico della Fondazione Inda (Chorus). First performance: Syracuse, Greek Theatre, 29 June 2018.

⁵ “I titoli delle due tragedie e della commedia tratteggiano . . . il volto proteiforme dell’eroe e del tiranno nel mondo antico, descrivendone l’escalation tragica, il deragliamento psichico e la possibile degenerazione farsesca”.

driven to solitude and crime and in this way becomes his own victim (Canfora 2018: 10-11).⁶

In point of fact, contrary to the keynote declarations of the Festival's promoters, in the case of Euripides' *Heracles* Emma Dante's directorial choices end up by draining the political values of the play of almost any significance. The figure of Lycus, the terrifying tyrant, is reduced, more or less, to that of a neurotic caricature and as far as that of Heracles is concerned, the motif of the fall of the hero and of his psychological and material destruction is merely hinted at, and even then in a grotesque fashion. So no musing on power and tyranny, then, the themes which permeate almost the whole of Attic tragedy. If anything, there is the prevailing sense of an 'existential' perspective: of how divine providence can have allowed an invincible hero, capable of killing terrifying monsters, to commit atrocious crimes against his own family, so that he would inevitably face a future of grief and suffering and become the emblem of the precariousness of human glory.

The most striking feature of the staging is that of giving the parts of all the male characters of the play (Lycus, Heracles, Amphitryon, Theseus, the Messenger) to female actors (who are significantly 'masculinized' in their gestures, intonation and the volume of their voices). Only the chorus of old men (Fig. 1) and the coryphaeus (Samuel Salamone) are left to male interpreters. With this provocative choice, Emma Dante intends to overturn the dominant codes of ancient theatre where it was usual to entrust the parts to male actors. So Serena Barone takes the part of old Amphitryon, Heracles' father, Mariangela Colace is Heracles, just back from Hades in his shining armour, whose manner of walking is convulsive and spasmodic, and whose gestures, unremittently exaggerated, and Carlotta Viscovo is Theseus. The part of Megara, Heracles' wife, is interpreted by Naike Anna Silipo. In a preliminary scene, 'invented' by the director as a sort of informative prologue, all the characters, including the minor parts, enter one at a time, accompanied by tumultuous drum-rolls, and introduce themselves to the public, telling them who they are. During the course of this bizarre parade, voices, movements and costumes straight away coincide in exhibiting the exuberance and grotesque dimension that will characterize the whole play. The figure of Amphitryon, Heracles' aged father, is the one immediately to catch the spectator's attention. In this production he gains a centrality absent in the ancient text, seated, as he is, in a wheelchair, and speaking in a strong Sicilian accent and with a shrill voice. If the local accent is meant to excite empathy in the audience, his accentuated physical fragility (some-

⁶ "Perché la metafora del potere è metafora della vita stessa, è apologo morale che ci obbliga a riflettere sulla precarietà della sorte umana, sulla sua mutevolezza imperscrutabile e spesso irragionevole. Intorno a questa riflessione si aggrovigliano i nodi esistenziali degli eroi – positivi e negativi – della tragedia greca. Le biografie dei tiranni della storia greca si colorano dei tratti tipici delle biografie degli eroi del mito: infanzia marginale e predestinazione, segnalate talora da una qualche deformità, fisica e/o morale, matrimonio importante e ascesa sociale, gesta di conquista e attività di fondazione, tracollo del potere e morte eccezionale – in definitiva, squilibrio e disarmonia, che si estrinsecano in un impulso alla contraddizione e all'eccesso. Nel bene e nel male. Ed è così che eroe e antieroe diventano facce della stessa medaglia e della stessa persona, ed è così che nella tragedia greca il tiranno diviene figura titanica nella sua grandezza, il cui prestigio e potere si ritorcono anche, anzi soprattutto, contro se stesso: persino al di là della sua stessa volontà. Il tiranno è infatti costretto alla solitudine e al crimine, e diviene perciò vittima di se stesso".

times he gets out of the wheelchair and walks with difficulty, leaning on crutches) makes him an emblem of human precariousness, susceptible to fear and pietas, and an uncompromising opponent of Lycus' tyrannical prevarication.



Fig. 1: The Chorus. Photo Franca Centaro/AFI Siracusa.

The aspect of the play that strikes the spectator right from the beginning is undoubtedly the originality of Concetta Maringola's scenery. On the large circular surface of the Greek theatre of Syracuse there is no particularly noticeable reference to Greek antiquity, but neither is there any to modernity. There are no palaces or large buildings in the background as could be expected. The walls around which the actors move are not those of Thebes, but rather expanses of white marble seven metres high and about twenty in length, upon which are hanging dozens of black and white photos of the dead together with skulls and votive candles. In front of the walls are placed open tombs from which wooden crosses are sticking up and going round and round like windmills. At the centre of the scene a large marble tank full of lustral water is a conspicuous place of purification: Megara and Heracles' children will immerse themselves in it after the death sentence decreed by the terrible Lycus, before the hero's return to mete out justice. The scene is obviously a stylized version of a cemetery, a place of death, suffering and ritual. The inevitable spatial allusion is to Hades, the place Heracles is about to return from after concluding his last labour (the capture of Cerberus); but there is also included a tacit reference to the massacre of his family that the protagonist, driven mad by Hera, will shortly carry out, and to the fact that Heracles will then want to commit suicide to pay for his guilt, before he is saved by Theseus' friendship and his promise of a welcome in the land of Attica. The scenic space occupied by the cemetery may thus be considered as a suggestive extension of the extrascenic space

(the Underworld) where the protagonist has just come from, and also as a symbolic forecast of the deaths about to happen.

Emma Dante's theatre is one which communicates above all through body-language: the physicality of the female actors dominates the stage with incessant rhythmical movements often ending in frenzied dancing. If the tyrant Lycus manifests his corporeality in a pompous and boastful manner to the point of appearing a caricature of megalomania which becomes almost ridiculous, Heracles is presented as excessive from all points of view (Fig. 2). His first stage entrance is emblematic: first he pauses in silence to contemplate the photos of the dead on the cemetery wall; then suddenly, at the moment when Megara and his children are about to be executed by Lycus' minions, he bounds on to the stage, exuberant and brash, accompanied by a servant laden with his baggage, acclaimed like a star by the crowd of citizens surrounding him, who are waving his picture and asking for his autograph. His jerky, irascible movements are reminiscent of a caricature of a Sicilian pupo (a scenic modality which will return at the end in the dialogue between Heracles and Theseus)⁷ rather than of a state of mental agitation already present from the moment he comes onstage. The bunch of roses he offers his wife is an element underlining the farcical dimension of the whole production. Burlesque is indeed the dominant signature style of the staging, albeit with insertions of great tragic pathos, as, for example, in the scene where Megara, anguished but full of dignity, celebrates the funeral clothing ritual of her children preceded by the rite of purifying and cleansing in the tank.

Heracles is a strange play, full of sudden twists and turns, in which the whole range of passions and all the shades of theatrical meaning are in some way included: feeling and fury, horror and pathos, fable and grotesque, cynicism and sentiment, family affection and Dionysian delirium. And it is, above all, the play about madness par excellence. From Seneca onwards, playwrights and directors focused their attention on the explosion of homicidal mania which strikes and drags a hero such as Heracles, by definition a civilizer and benefactor of humanity, down into the dust.⁸ The madness is caused by the monsters Lyssa (Madness) and Eris (Strife) unleashed by Hera, but perhaps it is an affliction which has been lurking in the protagonist's mind for some time, and which suddenly and resoundingly breaks out. Scholars have been discussing this for centuries, but in Euripides' play the *rhexis* of the Messenger (ll. 922-1015) patently emphasizes the 'change' undergone by Heracles (cf. l. 931: ὁ δ' οὐκέθ' αὐτὸς ἦν, "He was no longer himself") at the moment he evokes in words the symptoms of the hero's sudden madness, which the audience does not see: his distorted face, his rolling eyes swollen with bloody veins, the foam which trickled from his mouth, his manic laughter, etc. With Seneca's *Heracles furens* the protagonist's madness will be anticipated to the audience right from the prologue, in order to lend continuity and solidity to the plot; besides this, the *furor* will be represented as the inevitable consequence of an exagger-

⁷ On the continual reference to the Opera dei Pupi see Giovannelli 2018.

⁸ The theme of the homicidal madness of Heracles is not an invention of Euripides, but is one of the features of the legend which was mentioned elsewhere; it must have been cited in the lost epic poem *Kypria* of the fifth century BC and according to Pausanias (9.11.2) it was quoted by Stesichorus and by Panyassis while the historian Pherecydes of Athens (fr. 14) cites the names of five children thrown into the fire by their father. For the history of the reworkings, adaptations and stagings of Euripides' *Heracles* see Riley 2008 and Wyles 2015.

ated *modus vivendi*, the consequence of the hero's obsessive megalomania. Along these lines modern reworkings and theatrical productions have greatly emphasized Heracles' madness as a crucial moment of the play, with differing results.



Fig. 2: Heracles (Mariagiulia Colace). Photo Franca Centaro/AFI Siracusa.

Given these premises it was legitimate to expect an ingenious solution from Emma Dante in the case of the representation of the 'dance of madness'; but the ballet performed by the two demons Lyssa (Francesca Laviosa) and Eris (Arianna Pozzoli) is brief and lacking in intensity. The solution adopted by director Luca De Fusco in 2007 during his staging of Euripides' *Heracles* in the same theatre was much more successful. In that production the protagonist did not enter as a triumphant hero, but rather seemed a man tormented and alienated, unable to understand the sense of his destiny, tortured by an obscure malady which was devouring his soul. Lyssa, or Madness, not portrayed as a monster but as a lovely young girl attired in a silvery peplum, ensnared him and seduced him through a dance accompanied by poignant violin music which evoked his spiralling delirium.⁹

⁹ The tragic madness of the *Heracles* of Euripides can be read as a form of Bacchic possession induced by the musical code. See Rocconi 1999.

The final scene, that is, the close dialogue between Theseus and Heracles with the concluding entombment rite of the bodies of Megara and the children, is rather too hurried, with the consequence of detracting from the fundamental importance that this scene has in Euripides' play, as it is the 'unravelling' of the plot with the promise of welcome in Attica and the celebration of the saving power of *philia* between heroes. The general impression is that the whole conclusion converges in giant steps towards the closing line, which Emma Dante puts into the text itself and into Theseus' mouth. Now that Heracles is at peace with himself and aware of the necessity of bearing his suffering, Theseus exclaims to him: "If anyone could see you now they would say: you are behaving like a woman!" In a way, this line, resounding with metatheatrical irony, could be said to put the finishing touch to Emma Dante's 'female' staging. It is not only a question of subverting the formal practice of ancient theatre which only allowed for male actors: this would indeed be a somewhat sterile exercise. Her aim is that of removing traditional heroism, mostly a matter of physical strength, from the male domain, and re-establishing its implications within a perspective both more human and more comprehensive, which includes victory but also defeat, solidity and fragility, joy and grief, madness and the capacity to accept, share and overcome suffering. In a word, a 'female' perspective.¹⁰

Emma Dante's version of *Heracles* is certainly very different from past productions of this play staged at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse and it displays the unmistakable hallmark of its director.¹¹ The alternation of registers and styles, from the pathetic to the grotesque, from the tragic to the humorous, the diversification of musical and choreographic modes (from syncopated movements to the whirling of dervishes) are elements at the same time startling and fascinating. This is of course compatible with the underlying intent of Euripidean tragedy which on the linguistic plane uses unusually varied registers, from dialogues spoken in a direct tone which is sometimes even colloquial to speeches which are lyrical, visionary and solemn. Emma Dante's object, as has been pointed out, was that of presenting a fragile Heracles thus subverting the bellicose heroism which made of him the emblem of brute force. The artist has explicitly revealed the aim of her work in these words:

I am interested in the fragility of Heracles because it is neither strength nor power that make him virile. It is his soul and his courage which render him hu-

¹⁰ For that matter, in *Heracles* Euripides had already focussed attention on the theme of the precariousness of the human condition. The playwright's choice to reverse the chronology of the mythical saga and to postpone the hero's massacre of his family until after he had finished his labours, as different from the conventional narrative of the myth (as evidenced by Bacchylides, Pindar, Apollodorus and Diodorus Siculus) served to show the invincible and civilizing hero, who had freed the world from terrible monsters, could guiltlessly succumb to madness. In the alternative sequence, the twelve labours represented the price to pay for the murder of his loved-ones, the expiation of a massacre already committed. On the different treatments of the myth of Heracles in the ancient world see Padilla 1998.

¹¹ Before 2018 there were only two productions of Euripides *Heracles* at the Greek Theatre of Syracuse: in 1964, Italian translation Salvatore Quasimodo, director Giuseppe De Martino, with Sergio Fantoni as Heracles and Arnaldo Foà as Lycus; and the above-mentioned one of 2007, Italian translation Giulio Guidorizzi, director Luca De Fusco with Ugo Pagliai as Amphitryon, Sebastiano Lo Monaco as Heracles and Massimo Reale as Lycus.

man, certainly not his muscles. He is a solitary and neurotic invincible demi-god, who at the height of the tragedy turns on his heels and exits the scene, not seeking the sacrifice of the penalty for his crimes [i.e. he does not want to undergo a sacrificial rite to expiate his crimes] but escapes from grief following the advice of his dearest friend. Heracles is human. (Dante 2018)¹²

This is an interesting approach, a legitimate one too, and from a certain point of view would also have pleased Euripides who definitely focuses on these aspects in his play. The factor which remains less convincing and, in any case, not taken to its ultimate consequence is the transformation of the hero into a woman, his feminization. In order to demonstrate the weak and unstable side of heroism is it really necessary to burden it with highly connoted female features? At the end of the performance the feeling remains that this is a clever provocation but an unresolved one. As if the director and her production remain enveloped in the paradoxes of the scenic game she has expertly created.

Translation by Susan Payne

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¹² "In Eracle mi interessa la fragilità perché non è la forza né il potere a renderlo virile. È la sua anima e il suo coraggio a fare di lui un essere umano, non certo i suoi muscoli. È un semidio invincibile solitario e nevrotico, che all'apice della tragedia gira i tacchi ed esce di scena, non cerca il sacrificio della pena per i suoi delitti, ma fugge dal dolore seguendo il consiglio dell'amico del cuore. È umano Eracle".