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Women in Greek Tragedy Today: A Reappraisal

STEVE WILMER

Reacting to the concerns expressed by Sue-Ellen Case and others that Greek tragedies were written by men and for men in a patriarchal society, and that the plays are misogynistic and should be ignored by feminists, this article considers how female directors and writers have continued to exploit characters such as Antigone, Medea, Clytemnestra and Electra to make a powerful statement about contemporary society.

In the 1970s and 1980s feminist scholars launched an important critique of the patriarchal values embedded in Western culture. Amongst other targets, they questioned the canonization of ancient Greek tragedy, labelling the plays misogynistic.[1] Nevertheless, many female directors and playwrights continue to stage ancient Greek tragedy today. In this essay I want to recall what the distinguished theatre scholar Sue Ellen Case wrote about such plays in 1985 and discuss this in the light of more recent productions. In particular I want to consider why women who contrive to murder their husbands or their mothers or their children have become so popular on the stage.

Sue-Ellen Case's criticism of ancient Greek drama titled 'Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts', for *Theatre Journal*, was based mainly on two texts: Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Aristotle's *Poetics*. In addition to documenting the androcentric nature of ancient Greek society, she used the example of the *Oresteia* to assert that Greek drama was written by men and performed by male actors for a male audience to promote an anti-female agenda. She argued that the judgment at the end of the trilogy is indicative of the patriarchal values controlling the play (and Greek tragedy in general), determining that the male is the true parent of the child and that the female is only 'the nurse of the child'.[2] Orestes can be exonerated for killing his mother since his father, whom he was avenging, was his only real parent. Because of the chauvinistic attitudes expressed in this trilogy (and other ancient Greek plays), Case suggested that the feminist reader might decide that 'the female roles have nothing to do with women, that these roles should be played by men as fantasies of "Woman" as "Other" than men, disruptions of a patriarchal society which illustrates its fear and loathing of the female parts' and that the 'roles of Medea, Clytemnestra, Cassandra or Phaedra are properly played as drag roles'.[3] Case also quoted Aristotle's argument that women are 'inferior' and should not be depicted as brave or intellectually clever in plays. She concluded her article with the suggestion that the

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revered position of ancient Greek drama should be reconsidered: 'Overall, the feminist practitioners and scholars may decide that such plays do not belong in the canon – that they are not central to the study and practice of theatre.'[4]

Despite her warning, it seems that since Case made her plea there has been an increasing number of productions of ancient Greek drama staged by female (and feminist) directors such as Ariane Mnouchkine, Deborah Warner, Katie Mitchell and Rhodessa Jones and reinterpreted by women writers such as the playwrights Hélène Cixous, Suzanne Osten, Cherríe Moraga and Marina Carr, as well as the novelist Christa Wolf.[5] In addition, leading feminist scholars have continued to address the complexities of Greek tragedy, especially taking an interest in the character of Antigone, such as Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray and Peggy Phelan.[6] Perhaps Case undervalued the potential for these plays to provide a critique (as well as an endorsement) of patriarchal society, and did not anticipate the way in which the most outrageous characters, Medea and Clytemnestra, would become the most performed.[7]

Helene Foley, in discussing a variety of new approaches to ancient Greek drama, observed recently that 'contemporary actresses and female playwrights favor Greek tragedy because of the extraordinary repertoire of powerful and subtle female roles'.[8] Edith Hall has commented on the sheer number of females in Greek tragedy. 'In the second century AD the satirist Lucian remarked that "there are more females than males" in these plays . . . Only one extant tragedy, Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, contains no women, and female tragic choruses in the surviving plays outnumber male by twenty-one to ten'.[9] Katie Mitchell, who directed the *Oresteia* at the National Theatre in London in 1999, referring to Peter Hall's all-male production of the trilogy in the National Theatre twenty years earlier, asked,

> Should you do *The Oresteia* with an all-male cast? I would only do that if the audience was also all male. But you couldn't get that situation today. It would also be very hard to justify to the female acting profession, the fact that in this wonderful trilogy that has some of the best roles ever written for women, they should all be given to men. I think that would be indefensible.[10]

In addition to ancient Greek drama offering plenty of roles for women, many of which are extremely challenging, one can also argue that these plays provide a thorough critique of male as well as female behaviour. In fact the men usually appear in a worse light. One aspect that seems relevant is that the Greek heroines are often positioned as occupying a different moral stance from their male counterparts and appealing to values that, regardless of how they were viewed in ancient times, we might consider today as preferable to those of the male characters. For example, Lysistrata argues that the men are destroying Athenian society through warfare; her organized protest for a peaceful solution emphasizes the values of harmony and mutual respect as opposed to combat and male aggression. It is significant that in 2003, with the USA and Britain set on invading Iraq, world opinion was divided over the wisdom of this unprovoked attack and *Lysistrata* served as emblematic for some of those people who wished to signal an international protest against the invasion, mounting over a thousand productions and readings of the play simultaneously around the globe on 3 March.

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Likewise, Antigone gains the higher ground by asserting that the traditional rituals of honouring a dead member of the family are more important to observe than an arbitrary edict from a male dictator, and, as George Steiner has shown, her actions have been applied to oppressed individuals and communities as usefully in the modern day as in earlier times.[11] In recent years productions throughout the world have used the play to call attention to oppressive conditions in different countries, almost inevitably stressing the rectitude of Antigone's stance.[12] The 2004 production of *The Burial at Thebes*, a version of *Antigone* by Seamus Heaney directed by Lorraine Pintal at the Abbey Theatre, supported Antigone's moral position as much through production techniques as through the text, with Creon dressed like a pompous and arrogant Latin American dictator in a white suit with red sash and medallion, trying unsuccessfully to wield his authority. Antigone demonstrated her autonomy[13] and strength of character from the opening moments of the play, in a dance sequence with her fiancé Haimon during which she left him abandoned on the stage.

Hecuba in *The Trojan Women* assumes a superior moral position in pleading that the women in her court be treated with respect and dignity rather than being distributed like chattel amongst the victorious warriors. In the middle of the play, the callous murder of Hector's infant son Astyanax by throwing him from the castle walls confirms the level of inhumanity of the Greek warriors. In a 2006 production in Dublin directed by Maisie Lee, this moment was accentuated by an innocent-looking child being dragged off to his death, and being brought back onstage later, wrapped in blood-covered rags.

Medea claims the sanctity of her marriage against the wishes of Jason to abandon her. The play can be acted as an evenly matched conflict between two people who by the end of the play have both suffered and have mortally wounded each other, such as in Lars von Trier's film version where both characters seem devastated by the end. But recent productions by women have tended to diminish the character of Jason and have shown Medea, in spite of her monstrous actions, to be someone with whom they can identify. The women are also seen as more honourable than the men in other Greek tragedies such as Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, where the daughters of Danaus flee from arranged incestuous marriages. Likewise, in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Iphigenia and her mother supplicate for her right to life against an overwhelming demand that she be sacrificed.

However, although they are often placed in a better light than the male characters, some of these female characters provide considerable problems for modern interpretation, especially because of the exaggerated nature of their actions. Accordingly, a feminist construction has often been placed on the interpretation and revision of these plays today. The characters of Clytemnestra, Medea, Electra and Hecuba can be represented as women who have been victimized but fight back, who empower themselves and are empowered, by the support of other women, to take action to overturn their oppression. Although the transgressive nature of their deeds causes some difficulty, as I will discuss later, the women are often provoked by male abuse, and their actions can be shown to be justified on those grounds. These are proud, noble women who have been mistreated and the audience's sympathies are engaged because they can identify with that abuse and feeling of outrage. Their actions, although unacceptable as social behaviour, can seem appropriate within the context of the drama. These women all

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express values that oppose the patriarchal order, and their viewpoints resonate in today's more sexually liberated, divorce-prone society where women have gained unprecedented power in government and the workforce but continue to strive for equality, respect and control over their own bodies.

Medea's rage is fully understandable to a modern audience because she has sacrificed so much to help her husband. As the actress Tina Shepard says, 'I don't know if I have ever known a woman that is completely Medean in what she does, but I certainly have known a lot who feel what she has felt.'[14] In the Abbey Theatre production directed by Deborah Warner, which toured to London, New York and Paris (2000–3), Fiona Shaw performed Medea as a thoroughly modern woman in a black cocktail dress, who rages at her husband's disloyalty, and then slyly plots revenge in convincing fashion. John Waters, an *Irish Times* columnist, expressed his dismay at the way the acting of the play created such sympathy for the Medea figure. Jason was played as 'a muscle-bound himbo whose self-justifications play as pure parody', while Fiona Shaw 'charms the harm out of Medea, winning our sympathy by tickling our funny bones, and concealing the fact that the production functions like a Christmas panto: the men being pompous tyrants the women free spirits seeking to deflate this pomposity'.[15] Clearly intimidated by the way in which Medea's actions were exonerated, he added, 'You could see women in the audience at key moments glancing meaningfully at their male partners, as if to say, "Now, see what we have to put up with. Count yourself lucky I don't stab your children in their sleep."'[16]

Similarly, in the production of *Les Danaides* (a reconstruction of a trilogy which begins with Aeschylus' *The Suppliants*, the remainder being lost), the (male) Romanian director Silviú Purcarete emphasized the image of the fifty fleeing women as innocent creatures who are unfairly victimized and unable to protect themselves but who gain revenge after a mass rape. The Romanian production presented the scene of revenge in a sympathetic and poetic mood, with the dresses of the women forming tents under which their new husbands slept on their wedding night, lit by candlelight, while the women quietly and unobtrusively dispatched them with domestic cutlery.

Another dimension that offers a potentially feminist slant in Greek tragedy is the relationship between the female characters. The expression of solidarity amongst women to overcome oppression is a common motif of Greek tragedy. In her hour of need Medea calls on the complicity of the women around her to help in her campaign of revenge against the husband who has betrayed her. Although Medea does not gain explicit sympathy for her actions, there is amongst the women a sense of female solidarity against male oppression. The nurse and the chorus of women do not agree with the nature of Medea's actions but by their decision to keep silent and not interfere with her, they tacitly support her and become accessories to the crime. Just as in Susan Glaspell's play *Trifles*, where two female characters cover up the evidence of a third woman's murder of her husband, the nurse and the female entourage in *Medea* assist in the murders by remaining silent and taking no action that would alert others to Medea's intentions, as one can see in the Pasolini film adaptation. Likewise, in the various versions of the Electra story by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, the chorus acts in collusion with Electra. And in *The Trojan Women* a strong feeling of women's solidarity pervades as the imprisoned victims of male Greek authority discover their destinies together, and rant

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and rave and cry out in rage against their collective mistreatment. They also try to stand up for each other and protect each other even though they are virtually powerless.

The Graeae production of *Peelers* (which toured internationally in 2003) took this aspect of disempowerment and female solidarity a step further with a play about disabled actors performing in the chorus of a production of *The Trojan Women*. As they sit waiting for their lines in the action of the Greek tragedy, three women, all with physical disabilities – one in a wheel-chair, one who is deaf and one who is four feet tall with a short life expectancy – comment on their lives as actors, unable to land major roles in plays because of their disabilities, as well as the personal tragedies they have encountered. Like the women in the Greek tragedy, they have been disenfranchised by society and they identify, for example, with Andromache, who loses her child in the play. But they have suffered even greater fates. They sympathize also with the Greek chorus who, unlike the aristocratic women who know whose wives they will be forced to become, have not learned their destinies. But they are triply marginalized by being unable to do those things that others are able to do, such as giving birth. One of the women describes how she was sterilized by a doctor because of her disability. When another discovers that she is menstruating, the other two support her and urge her to have a child as a way of empowering herself.[17]

As previously mentioned, scholars have called attention to the misogynist values underlying some of the ancient texts. There are a surprising number of females murdering males in Greek tragedy, some accidentally (like Agave dismembering Pentheus and Deianeira poisoning Heracles) and others deliberately (like Medea, Clytemnestra, Hecuba and her assistants in *Hecuba*, and the daughters of Danaus in the lost Danaid trilogy of Aeschylus). Slavoj Žižek, in an article on 'The Feminine Excess', labels some of these women (Hecuba, Medea and Phaedra) 'repulsive monsters' who take 'pathologically excessive' actions.[18] Sarah Pomeroy has attributed the misogynist sentiments in Euripides' plays to his characters rather than to himself, suggesting that Euripides presented such opinions in order to raise important issues and represented 'women victimized by patriarchy in almost every possible way'.[19] That Medea has been mistreated by her husband and reacts in an aggressive manner is something that makes her attractive to a female audience today. However, the question that haunts the figure of Medea is how a mother can justify killing her own children. If she can be seen to reflect a sympathetic position at the beginning of the play (and it is perhaps worth remembering that her early speech in the play about the plight of women – 'Thrice would I under shield Stand, rather than bear childbirth-peril once' – was recited at suffragette meetings from the early twentieth century),[20] what about by the end of the play? Can an audience, even a feminist audience, maintain sympathy for a woman who acts so contrary to the values of modern society and to the notions of motherhood, or is one forced to accept that such plays as *Medea* and the *Oresteia* reflected the patriarchal values of Greek society and presented such characters as figures diabolical to men?

But rather than plays like *Medea* or the *Oresteia* disappearing from the canon, they seem to be more popular than ever. The representation of 'feminine excess' seems to strike a chord with modern audiences, possibly because of the issues they expose about gender identity and marital relations. According to Helene Foley, 'It is by and large the

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Fig. 1 **Fiona Shaw as Medea in the Abbey Theatre 2000 production of *Medea* translated by Kenneth McLeish and Frederic Raphael, after Euripides (photograph: Neil Libbert).**

outrageous, courageous, untraditional, and often androgynous female figures . . . who have been most performed and reworked to heighten the gender issues in these plays on the late twentieth-century stage.'[21] Edith Hall has also commented on the treatment of gender roles and marriage in Greek tragedy:

> The single most important reason why Greek tragedy was rediscovered by women in the 1970s and 1980s was because it gave an appearance of honesty concerning the opportunities life afforded their ancient counterparts, and especially concerning the relatively greater importance of affective ties with children, siblings and parents compared to those with lovers and husbands. Greek tragic narratives are strong on marital breakdown and stepfamilies, but weak on what we call 'romantic' liaisons.[22]

Antigone perhaps serves a similar purpose for a modern audience in her strong, rebellious attack on patriarchal norms. Like Medea, she is also an outsider in that, as Judith Butler has shown, she defies traditional kinship and generational status, since her father, Oedipus, is also her half-brother (her name literally means 'anti-generation'.[23]) She can represent the outsider who has gone beyond the law and invokes an alternative law when an arbitrarily imposed law appears unjustified. Whereas Creon creates his own law, which will ultimately punish her, she represents those who carry their own legal principles within them. Thus Creon can easily be seen as any dictator who acts unilaterally, imposing unjust laws, with Antigone as a figure in the society reacting against such laws.

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But more recently, the democratic leader George W. Bush has been shown to resemble Creon in Seamus Heaney's *Burial at Thebes*, defying international opinion by invading a country unprovoked and creating an extra-legal system of detention without trial for prisoners from the war (and a prison at Guantánamo that is beyond US jurisdiction),[24] while Antigone represents the indirect victim of such extra-legal circumstances, refusing to abide by such proscriptions. Judith Butler asks whether 'the limit for which [Antigone] stands, a limit for which no standing, no translatable representation is possible, is not precisely the trace of an alternate legality that haunts the conscious, public sphere as its scandalous future'.[25] In Bush's case, parts of that scandalous future may occur when the detainees from Guantánamo (and various secret prisons) are finally released, and when evidence of torture and maltreatment is adduced.[26]

While the excessive actions of these female characters are combined with strong moral justifications, modern productions often scale down or transform their outrageous behaviour in order to ensure audience sympathy for them. It is noteworthy that Marina Carr, having based *By the Bog of Cats* closely on the structure of Euripides' *Medea*, changed the ending so that the Medea character does not fly away triumphantly after killing her child, but commits suicide. Similarly, Deborah Warner's production of *Medea* in the Abbey Theatre in 2000 softened the ending, with Medea sitting quietly beside Jason, both aghast at the turn of events. Many productions have increased sympathy for the character of Medea by emphasizing her as an outsider, who is being mistreated partly because of her inferior social status. Thus she has often been played by an actress from an identifiable ethnic minority group such as, in the United States, Chicano, Asian-American, African-American and so on. In Marina Carr's *By the Bog of Cats*, for the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1998, the character of Medea (Hester Swaine) was depicted as a member of the travelling community, ostracized by Irish society.

Cherríe Moraga created sympathy for Medea in *The Hungry Woman: A Chicano Medea* (staged, amongst other places, at Brown University by Patricia Ybarra in 2006) by setting the play in a mental hospital where Medea has been confined after killing her son. Thus the excessive actions of the protagonist are softened by them being viewed by her in retrospect, while she suffers from emotional trauma. The play creates additional sympathy for the character by representing her as a woman who is doubly marginalized in American society as both a Chicana and a lesbian. The action takes place in the future after a pan-American revolution, which has liberated the indigenous people of the Americas, has gone badly wrong with lesbians being excluded from the new society. Medea, who has chosen her lesbian lover over Jason and been exiled from the new revolutionary state, which outlaws homosexuality, wants to hold on to her child and regrets him growing up to be an aggressive, heterosexual man. Jason applies for his son to be returned to him when he is thirteen, and Medea fights against this, jeopardizing her relationship with her lover. When her son decides to leave her, Medea kills him in an Aztec ritual and then finally, having lost her husband, lesbian lover and son, she commits suicide in prison.[27] Like Marina Carr, Cherríe Moraga softens the disturbing impact of infanticide by having Medea take her own life in an act of despair. The play also engages the audience's sympathies by highlighting feminist and gender issues. Ybarra wrote about

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the importance of staging the play as a feminist intervention in national politics:

> While it is difficult to have hope against the backdrop of the US's own reactionary politics, which include the militarization of the US–Mexico border, anti-queer legislation, the potential overturning of Roe vs. Wade, and numerous other attacks on our civil liberties, I don't think we have the choice to lick our wounds or look away. Instead, we might do best to look south to recent elections in Chile and Bolivia, which have placed female and indigenous politicians with progressive platforms in power . . . This production is dedicated to being open to the possibility that this transformation might not only change life for our southern neighbors, but also that such a *movimento* might cross the border into the US to do that same work here.[28]

By contrast, Rhodessa Jones developed a production of *Medea* with incarcerated women that was staged in jail and combined their stories with the original in an all-female version called *Reality is Just Outside the Window* (1992). Rena Fraden has written about some of the ways in which these women identified with the original story:

> Medea seems sometimes to speak for herself and sometimes as a representative of all women . . . Medea is full of rage and so are the women in jail. Like Medea, these women are seen by society as outsiders, barbarians. Like Medea, they have committed crimes and crimes have been committed against them. They too have broken taboos, transgressed laws. They are women who are ruled by their passions, who are self-destructive, and who destroy others.

One of the actresses, Edris Cooper, commented that in rewriting the original, she 'fully embraced' the Medea story:

> I did not attempt to reinvent anything other than putting the language in San Francisco jargon. I just tried to look at it through proletarian eyes, not actor educated on Greek symbolism, etc. hoorah. I just tried to break it down. My simpler goal was to reduce every speech into three sentences or less. I was aware that every part was to be played by women so the parody embodied women's views of men. Lastly, I was feeling rather Medeaish and put upon by men so I emptied my mind of all the bad language I had been fed by the men in my life. We recognizing ourselves as flawed characters, had no problem accepting Medea's moral contradictions.[29]

Like Medea's infanticide, Electra's conspiracy to kill her mother seems hard to justify in such a way as to retain the sympathy of the audience. And so Thaddeus O'Sullivan's film *In the Border* (which updates the *Oresteia* to the troubles in Northern Ireland) presents Clytemnestra's murder as partly accidental to make it more plausible and Electra more sympathetic. Having been trained by the IRA, with whom his father has been associated, the Orestes figure returns home to shoot his neighbour, McGuire (Aegisthus), who had informed on his father, and then walks into the house with the shotgun to tell his mother. His sister (Electra) grabs the gun to threaten their mother and, as they struggle over it, the gun goes off, killing the mother, much to their horror.

Clytemnestra's actions in the *Agamemnon* are equally problematic. Her initial rage in the play, which might be easy to accept early on, is prolonged and grossly re-emphasized

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with the display of her victims on the *ekkyklema* at the end of the *Agamemnon*. Depending on the production, the horror of the audience at her actions can be accentuated by this graphic display, and if the original structure of the play is preserved, it is difficult to sympathize with her when her hands are dripping with blood and the corpses lie at her side. For example, the Peter Stein production of the *Oresteia* in 1980 at the Schaubühne in Berlin emphasized this with blood running off the front of the stage into a gulley during her final speech. As James Diggle stresses, Clytemnestra is an axe-murderer with a vengeance, exulting in Agamemnon's blood as if it were rain from heaven.[30]

However, Clytemnestra's actions can become more understandable to an audience when reminded that her husband sacrificed her daughter. Consequently, many modern productions written or directed by women solve 'some of the problem of the trilogy's notorious misogyny'[31] by incorporating parts of the *Iphigenia in Aulis* in the performance (e.g. *Les Atrides*, 1990–2, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine; *Ariel*, 2002, by Marina Carr; and *Mythos*, 2003, directed by the Israeli Rina Yerushalmi) or simply by including Iphigenia as a silent presence on stage, as in the 1999 production by Katie Mitchell. Edith Hall argues that the 'post-feminist Western liberal consensus can cope with the terrifying Clytemnestra of Aeschylus better if it is simultaneously offered the more sympathetic Clytemnestra of *Iphigenia in* Aulis'.[32] Conversely, by incorporating Clytemnestra's revenge into productions of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the play can become less about victimized females, and more about females taking justifiable revenge for wrongful actions.[33]

In the initial scenes of *Medea*, *Electra* and the *Oresteia* the audience might empathize with the hurt and rage that Medea, Electra and Clytemnestra feel, but without rewriting the original or softening its impact through production techniques it is difficult by the ends of the plays to maintain the sympathy of the audience for the characters. We tend to be horrified by their actions. The original versions of Greek drama provide an unusual respect for the power of women to rebel and to subvert the power relations to which they are subjected. As Medea says,

> Woman quails at every peril,
> Faint-heart to face the fray and look on steel;
> But when in wedlock-rights she suffers wrong,
> No spirit more bloodthirsty shall be found. (lines 263–6)[34]

In addition to modifying the crimes and eccentricities of the female protagonists, feminist productions of Greek tragedy have sometimes deliberately explored or exposed the patriarchal aspects of the original plays. Significantly, *The Eumenides* has come in for such treatment. As Katie Mitchell observes,

> There's also a problem with the resolution of the final play, *The Eumenides*, where Apollo says that Orestes should be let off for killing his mother, Clytemnestra, because mothers have nothing to do with their children's birth. It's a fantastically nasty, sexist argument, which is going to make most women in the audience [go] ballistic, and quite rightly.[35]

Thus Ariane Mnouchkine's *Les Atrides* used snarling furies who continued to menace the audience after the final judgment had been made against their wishes.[36] Mary Kay Gamel

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records her own 1992 version called *Furies*, which ironized the judgment in contemporary terms:

> Suddenly the Furies broke in, and the show proper began, with Apollo and Athena as corporate lawyers, the Furies female beatniks and proto-feminists, and the chorus of Athenians middle-class Americans. After the trial ended with Orestes' acquittal, the Furies threatened Athens to a backdrop of slides of natural disasters – dust storms, toxic waste, and (most appropriate for Santa Cruz) earthquakes. At that point Athena played her trump card – commodity capitalism – as slides of 50s consumer goods appeared. The Furies, convinced, changed into sweetheart dresses and joined in the singing of 'Bless Us, Athena' to the tune of 'God Bless America'. . . The non-naturalistic setting and acting, blatant anachronisms, and mixture of tones all contributed to a radical destabilization of the 'classic' status of the script, raising questions about the social construction of female roles by masculinist institutions (including the theater).[37]

As Mary-Kay Gamel suggests, 'Feminist productions can participate in the patriarchal subtext of ancient dramas not in order to confirm the subtext, but to examine and question it.'[38]

In other productions the female characters are enhanced to give them added emphasis and more agency. Jocasta, for example, has received this treatment by Hélène Cixous in *The Name of Oedipus: Song of the Forbidden Body*.[39] Helen Edmundson's 2006 version of *Orestes*, directed by Nancy Meckler for Shared Experience, cut some of the male characters (Apollo and Pylades) and strengthened the character of Electra to focus on the plight of the brother and sister in their struggle for survival. Electra essentially takes over the role of Pylades in the original version in providing the initiative for going on the attack rather than passively accepting their death sentences, and so she plays a much more active role in plotting a counter-attack against those who are planning to execute Orestes for matricide. By cutting the character of Apollo, who sorts out the mess in the original play in a *deux ex machina* appearance, Edmundson's version results in a tragic suicidal bloodbath. In some cases all-female companies have staged Greek tragedy to make a feminist statement. This was particularly popular in the US in the 1970s and 1980s.[40] More recently, the Finnish company Raging Roses produced an all-female version of the *Oresteia* in 1991.

In conclusion, many female contemporary theatre directors and dramatists have turned to Greek drama in the late twentieth century and the early twenty-first, having discovered that while Greek drama was written by men for a mainly (if not exclusively[41]) male audience, female characters in fifth-century drama often possess a strength of purpose, an ability to challenge male oppression and a sense of female solidarity that are often lacking in theatrical figures from later centuries. While scholars such as Sue-Ellen Case have emphasized the misogynist features underlying these plays, and classicists such as Froma Zeitlin have argued that in their original social context the female characters' 'actions and reactions are all used finally to serve masculine ends',[42] modern productions have often employed these dramas to serve female ends, sometimes by creating sympathy for the female protagonist in a relatively faithful rendition of the original and sometimes by changing parts of the play or ironizing the patriarchal aspects to make a more

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feminist statement. In the complex art of theatre, actors, directors, designers and writers (including translators) all have had a role in the way that these plays are performed and perceived.

For women who challenge and rebel against patriarchal structures in modern times, the Greek tragic heroines, and especially Antigone, who enters the political arena and challenges the political status quo, can provide alternative models in the power relations between men and women and have been used to question conventional notions of civic authority as well as family and marriage. According to Žižek, 'Antigone formulates her claim on behalf of all those who, like the *sans-papiers* in today's France, are without a full and definite socio-ontological status; . . . in our era of self-proclaimed globalization, they – the non-identified – stand for true universality.'[43] Likewise, by being 'excluded from the public affairs', the women in Greek tragedy 'embody the family ethics as opposed to the domain of public affairs . . . to serve as a reminder of the inherent limitation of the domain of public affairs.'[44] The excessive and aggressive actions of these women to challenge the patriarchal restrictions placed on them, combined with their noble outlooks and clever arguments, make them attractive and dynamic characters in performance and meaningful for our times. Thus, rather than being ignored by feminists, these figures have been increasingly exploited to interrogate moral values, gender roles and political issues today.

NOTES

1 See See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves; Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), pp. 97–110; Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), pp. 87–119; Helene Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 12–13; Sue-Ellen Case, 'Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts', *Theatre Journal*, 37, 3 (October 1985), pp. 317–27.

2 Case, 'Classic Drag', p. 324.

3 Ibid., p. 324.

4 Ibid., p. 327.

5 Deborah Warner directed *Electra* in 1988 and *Medea* in 2000, with Fiona Shaw playing the lead in both touring productions; Katie Mitchell directed the *Oresteia* at the National Theatre in London in 1999 and *Iphigenia at Aulis* at the same venue in 2004; and Rhodessa Jones directed the Medea Project with incarcerated women from 1992, mixing their own stories with the story of Medea. These revised versions include Hélène Cixous, *La Ville Parjure*; Per Lysander and Suzanne Osten, *Medea's Children*; Cherríe Moraga, *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*; Marina Carr, *By the Bog of Cats* and *Ariel*; Christa Wolf has written novels about Greek tragic figures: *Cassandra* and *Medea*.

6 Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2000); Luce Irigaray, *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution*, trans. K. Montin (London: Athlone, 1994); Peggy Phelan, *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories* (London: Routledge, 1997).

7 Edith Hall, 'Introduction: Why Greek Tragedy in the Late Twentieth Century', in Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley, eds., *Dionysus Since '69* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1–46, here p. 37.

8 Helene Foley, 'Modern Performance and Adaptation of Greek Tragedy', Presidential Address 1998, Washington, DC, available at http://216.158.36.56/Publications/PresTalks/FOLEY98.html.

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9 Edith Hall, 'The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy', in P. E. Easterling, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 93–126, here p. 105.

10 Katie Mitchell in conversation with Jonathan Croall, *Stagewrite*, Autumn 1999, available at http://www3.sympatico.ca/sylvia.paul/hughes_katie_mitchell.htm, accessed 24 July 2006. A number of all-male productions have been staged since Peter Hall's *Oresteia*, such as Ninagawa's *Medea* etc. See Helene Foley, 'Bad Women', in Hall *et al.*, *Dionysus Since '69*, pp. 90–8.

11 George Steiner, *Antigones* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

12 In organizing an international conference on Antigone in 2006, I was sent proposals for papers about recent productions in Brazil, Argentina, Mexico, the United States, Canada, Ireland, Britain, Belgium, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, Nigeria, South Africa and so on. See also Hall, 'Introduction: Why Greek Tragedy', pp. 18–19.

13 Antigone is referred to by the chorus as autonomous – line 821. The importance of this description has been identified by Robin Lane Fox recently: '"Autonomy" is a word invented by the ancient Greeks, but for them it had a clear political context: it began as the word for a community's self-government, a protected degree of freedom in the face of an outside power which was strong enough to infringe it. Its first surviving application to an individual is to a woman, Antigone, in drama.' Robin Lane Fox, *The Classical World: An Epic History of Greece and Rome* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 7.

14 Quoted in Helene Foley, 'Bad Women', p. 78.

15 John Waters, 'Problems in Excusing Medea's Murders', *Irish Times*, 19 June 2000.

16 Ibid.

17 Callie Oppedisano, 'Disability, Femininity, and Adaptations: Peeling and Trojan Women', *Texas Theatre Journal*, 2, 1 (2006), pp. 91–9.

18 See Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera's Second Death* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 184.

19 Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, p. 110.

20 Edith Hall, 'Introduction', in Euripides, *Bacchae and Other Plays* (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. ix–xxxix, here p. xi. Lines 250–1 of *Medea*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958 edition).

21 Helene Foley, 'Bad Women', p. 79.

22 Hall, 'Introduction: Why Greek Tragedy', p. 13.

23 Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 22.

24 Judith Butler writes, of the recent extra-legal activities of the US government, 'Sovereignty becomes that instrument of power by which law is either used tactically or suspended, populations are monitored, detained, regulated, inspected, interrogated, rendered uniform in their actions, fully ritualized and exposed to control and regulation in their daily lives. The prison presents the managerial tactics of governmentality in an extreme mode. And whereas we expect the prisons to be tied to law – to trial, to punishment, to the rights of prisoners – we see presently an effort to produce a secondary judicial system and a sphere of non-legal detention that effectively produces the prison itself as an extra-legal sphere.' Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004), p. 97

25 Butler, *Antigone's Claim*, p. 40.

26 For a discussion of the private firms subcontracted by the US government to interrogate detainees see Joan Didion, 'Cheney: The Fatal Touch', *New York Review of Books*, 53, 15 (5 October 2006), p. 56.

27 I am referring here to the unpublished 2005 text used by Ybarra (privately held), which differs from the original version published by West End/University of New Mexico Press in 2001.

28 Patricia Ybarra, Director's Notes, available at http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Theatre_Speech_Dance/HungryWomanProgram.pdf, accessed 28 December 2006.

29 Rena Fraden, *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theater for Incarcerated Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 55.

30 James Diggle, 'The Violence of Clytemnestra', in John Dillon and S. E. Wilmer, eds., *Rebel Women: Staging Ancient Greek Drama Today* (London: Methuen, 2005), pp. 215–21.

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31 Edith Hall, 'Iphigenia and Her Mother at Aulis', in Dillon and Wilmer, *Rebel Women*, pp. 3–41, here p. 18.
32 Ibid., p. 18–19.
33 Ibid., p. 19.
34 *Medea*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958 edition).
35 Katie Mitchell in conversation with Jonathan Croall, *Stagewrite*, Autumn 1999, available at http://www3.sympatico.ca/sylvia.paul/hughes_katie_mitchell.htm, accessed 24 July 2006.
36 In Marianne McDonald's view, 'The rest of the furies were about to attack the audience, feeling their leaders had sold them out'. Marianne McDonald response, available at http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/e_archive/1999/May.htm, accessed 23 July 2006, p. 6.
37 Mary Kay Gamel, 'Staging Ancient Drama: the Difference Women Make', available at http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/e_archive/1999/May.htm, accessed 23 July 2006, p. 3.
38 Gamel, 'Staging Ancient Drama,' p. 3. She also mentions that she found it possible to stage feminist versions of plays in ways that were consistent with the meaning of the original texts: 'In my stagings of ancient drama at UCSC my feminist commitment led in some cases to stagings which seemed true to the ancient script's meaning in its original context, in others to stagings which challenged or subverted what we took to be the original meaning.' Ibid., p. 1.
39 See Foley, 'Bad Women', pp. 86–7.
40 Ibid., pp. 98–103.
41 For a scholarly discussion of whether women attended the festival of Dionysus, see Sophocles, *Antigone*, ed. Mark Griffith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 51, n 150.
42 Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, p. 13.
43 See Žižek and Dolar, *Opera's Second Death*, p. 186.
44 See ibid., p. 186.

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