
At the end of the Fall 2013 academic term, I assigned the students in my post-graduate seminar on dramatic criticism the performance reviews in The*atre Journal*. In keeping with the journal’s mission, the productions reviewed are international, often off the beaten path, and, presumably, significant in some aesthetic or ideological way. The students’ collective response could roughly be paraphrased as “Why don’t we know more about theatre like this? Why don’t we do more work like this at our university? These shows take on racism and history and gender inequity with guts. Who supports these artists?” One might well have the same response to the productions Helene P. Foley discusses in her synoptic *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage*, the project of which is to “try to define and isolate central developments in the history of America’s ambivalent relation to Greek tragedy on the professional stage from the nineteenth century to the present” (3).

Foley is in a unique position for this huge undertaking. She is among the best-known and most influential of American classics scholars of the last two decades (prior to *Reimagining Greek Tragedy* her most recent book was *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*); she is, also, the *New York Times*’ “go to” person for comments on reworkings of the classic Greek plays on the New York stage. In *Reimagining*, Foley deploys both areas of expertise, albeit with a light touch. She foregrounds major socio-cultural themes and illustrates them with dozens of rich production examples. Her own critical voice regarding any individual show is generally muted. (My only minor disappointment in the book is that the author does not speak out more often, but for purposes of what she wants to accomplish she doesn’t really need to, as her exhaustive sleuthing and lucid reporting do the job.) The book’s overarching thesis is that “American theater has tended to respond to Greek tragedy and its central figures in an idiosyncratic fashion that reflects its own changing history and ideology and modifies our understanding of the possibilities for and implications of the tragic genre itself in the modern world” (11).

Rather than opting for either a strictly chronological or a strictly thematic arrangement, Foley does both, gracefully intertwining chronologically arrayed case studies under topical rubrics. Two of these rubrics are characterological—a chapter on Medeas and one on Oedipuses. Two are political—a chapter looking at uses of Greek tragedy during the revamping of progressive aesthetics largely under Modernism’s aegis and a chapter on the use of Greek tragedy to lobby for the pursuit of a better American democracy, especially during times of war.
The opening chapter, setting the stage for the four mentioned above, starts by making clear why Greek tragedy did not find much of an audience in the United States prior to the end of the nineteenth century. “[T]he themes of Greek tragedy, especially the inexorability of fate, [were] incompatible with the contemporary ethos” (30), especially that of the self-made individual. Greek tragedy gained traction with amateurs, however, as the Little Theatre movement of the nineteen-teens and its forerunners among soul-searching individuals created a groundswell of interest in non-naturalistic and poetic drama. The best known example of this sort of work is Maurice Browne’s now iconic Trojan Women (1913), undertaken by his Chicago Little Theatre and sent on tour after months of rehearsal as an anti-war statement. Foley points out that Browne was more motivated by artistic and financial opportunities than by political conviction, but no matter. His aesthete’s search for a rhythmic road map to an ideal and intense experience would provide a vocabulary to justify the use of non-realistic drama for all sorts of social therapy in the decades to come. My own favorite production in this chapter is Katherine Tingley’s Eumenides (1922), given at the outdoor Point Loma (California) Greek Theater. Tingley was a leader of the Universal Brotherhood and Theosophical Society—a movement that influenced the development of avant-garde theatre in Europe. She believed that “true drama points away from the unrealities to the real life of the soul” (44). The production photos included in Foley’s book (nicely illustrated throughout) reveal large gestures and clever costumes that sheathe in grotesque black—while still allowing for a lot of movement—the white dresses worn by the garland-bearing repurposed goddesses in the final part of the play. Eugene O’Neill makes the inevitable appearance with Mourning Becomes Electra (explored in depth in the introduction), but Foley’s point is less to rehash known theatre history than to point out that O’Neill inspired further interest in Greek plays and myths by replacing fate and gods with “the heavily deterministic forces of heredity and environment, of psychology, and of an indifferent natural and social world” (70-71).

Chapter two uses Wagner’s notion of the gesamtkunstwerk (total work of art) as a springboard to examine dance and musical production in the hands of American artists who saw Greek tragedy in its original form as precisely such an all-encompassing type of performance work. Pride of place, perhaps, goes to modern dance pioneer Martha Graham, whose reworkings between 1946 and 1962 of the stories of Medea, Clytemnestra, and Phaedra “challenged Greek originals by imagining events through the consciousness of the major female characters and by reconfiguring or eliminating elements of the original narrative through the use of flashback and a focus on moments of high emotional intensity” (95). Andrei Serban’s Fragments of a Greek Trilogy (with composer Elizabeth Swados) used “invented ritual” (97) at a time, 1974, when anti-establishment Baby Boomers were ripe to embrace such approaches to understanding culture and self. Will Power’s The Seven (2006)
was a hip-hop version of *Seven Against Thebes* requiring performers who could “rhyme in character, handle fragments of Aeschylus’s’ [sic] original, sing, and dance” (104). Set in the world of San Francisco’s gang culture of the eighties and nineties, *The Seven* sees Oedipus as the not-so-innocent father gangster/pimp who set his sons on the path of mutual self-destruction.

Chapter three considers productions wishing to teach lessons about democracy via re-visioning classics. It opens with the 1890 all-female production of *Antigone* by the upper-class Saturday Morning Club in Boston. The goal of the no-expenses-spared, pseudo-Grecian performance was, according to one participant, “to urge modern women to celebrate Antigone’s particularly female challenge to masculine authority” (126). The end-point is Peter Sellars’s 2005 version of Euripides’ *Children of Heracles*, so rarely produced that Foley points to this as only the seventh known production since antiquity. Sellars put Ralph Gladstone’s translation of the play between an opening dialogue among refugees, human rights experts, and political leaders and a closing collage of films from countries whose unrest has created political refugees. Sellars cast actual refugee children as Heracles’ children, and other family members spoke in accented English.

The chapter on Oedipus—redux, revised, revised, rebuked, one might say—discusses productions whose approaches ranged from the Freudian—Frank Galati’s *Oedipus Complex* (2004), which staged an encounter among Freud’s own story, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, and Freud’s interpretation of the play—to the post-Freudian/post-structuralist—Anthony Burgess’s adaptation staged by Michael Langham at Minneapolis’s Guthrie Theater in 1972 in which “man himself [is] the answer to the Sphinx’s riddle . . . unclean, a potential monster” (165). Other adaptations consider Oedipus as abandoned child and/or give much attention to Jocasta’s perspective and psyche. Foley concludes by remarking on the fact that most American versions of the Oedipus story want to stress the hero’s agency and choices rather than any doomed victimhood at the hands of fate. She also notes that this is one of only two Greek tragedies to which the commercial—rather than the experimental or university—stage has been more rather than less friendly. Oedipus, despite his pierced foot, has legs.

So does Medea, the subject of the book’s final chapter. Foley focuses on new U.S. versions and adaptations of the play rather than on productions of translations of the original, and her point is that the adaptations “confirm that America’s fascination with Medea derives from her role as an outsider who is at once victimized and surprisingly empowered in a nation often speciously categorized as a melting pot” (193). To cite only one example, Michael John LaChiusa’s *Marie Christine* (1999) is a near sung-through (opera-like) musical in which a wealthy mulatta (played by Broadway and opera star Audra McDonald) from New Orleans runs off with a white sailor to Chicago, where he deserts her to pursue and protect his political career. Like other adaptations in this chapter, *Marie Christine* “locate[s] the compelling
tragedy of Medea largely in the impossibility of assimilation to a white, male-dominated, unjust and unreliable culture” (215).

Foley gently but clearly reminds readers that the majority of the productions she discusses appeal and appealed to educated, sometimes monied, usually urban audiences, which is no wonder, as these “reconfiguration[s] of the plays ... reflect the tone of the most serious legitimate theater of the twentieth century” (229). The final sixty-nine pages of the book comprise seven appendices listing key productions of about a dozen Greek tragedies from 1798 to 2010, each including production personnel when known and, in many cases, lists of newspaper and other journalistic reviews. With these amazing resources, Foley more than delivers on her stated goal: “to leave behind a set of questions and projects for future exploration” (xiv).

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