

COLEÇÃO AUTORES GREGOS E LATINOS
SÉRIE ENSAIOS

Maria de Fátima Silva
Susana Hora Marques (eds.)

TRAGIC HEROINES
ON ANCIENT
AND MODERN STAGE



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PREFACE

The present work is the result of the contributions presented at an international conference of scholars that took place on the 30th and 31st January 2009 at the University of Coimbra¹, as part of the activities of the Network Performance of Ancient Greek Drama, whose members include amongst others the Centre of Classical and Humanistic Studies of Coimbra.

Under the theme of “tragic heroines in classical and modern stage”, the purpose of this conference was to allow the participants to share experiences and distinctive perspectives in the contemporary approach and treatment given to the plays of the Classical Antiquity, most of them related in one way or the other to the Classical Philology and to the Theatre.

The contributions originated from different European countries including the Check Republic,

¹ We would like to express our sincere thank you to Professor Frederico Lourenço and to Maria João Almeida for the valuable contribution towards the English version of certain pages of this work.

Greece, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Sweden – reflecting the considerable increment in the number of modern adaptations on stage of the Classical tragic plays across a variety of stages, particularly in Europe, from the second half of the 20th century as well as the interest shown in such performances by the contemporary audience.

The different presentations, 15 to 20 minutes long on average, were themed around the myths selected for the conference: Thebes, the Atreidae, Medea and Phaedra. Besides the considerations on the characters of the Greek and Roman traditions, equal attention was given to the modern adaptation of these myths, allowing for the identification of the different versions of a particular character or play at various moments and places, whose artistic directors, of different backgrounds and intents, allowed for a variety of different interpretations.

The programme combined a discussion of a more academic nature with a more practical one, since it also incorporated the production on stage of Plautus's *Poenulus* by the group “Thiasos” whose productions and back stage work had been previously brought to light by Professor Delfim Leão².

² Cf. also Ferreira, L. N., Jesus, C. A. M., eds. (2010), *FESTEA – Tema Clássico. Dez Anos de um Festival de Teatro (1999-2008)*. Coimbra: Centro de Estudos Clássicos e Humanísticos.

INTRODUCTION

CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS ANCIENT DRAMA IN THEATRE PRACTICE

In 2002 the European Network of Research and Documentation of Performances of Ancient Greek Drama (Arc-Net) started an intensive summer course about ancient Greek drama and its performance histories in different countries. The aim was to improve the understanding and exchange of ideas between the university departments of Classics and of Theatre Studies regarding (the study of) performances of ancient Greek drama. Students from different European countries studying Classics or Theatre Studies took part in the course. Instructors were teachers from those fields as well as invited theatre practitioners with experience in the staging of ancient Greek drama. Since 2002, this summer course has taken place every year. Students who participated also started to organize meetings and conferences for alumni to inform each other about developments in their research and/or practice. After conferences in Prague (2006) and Epidavros (2007), in January 2009 a conference was organised by students who had participated in the courses. This time the Classical Studies Department of the University of Coimbra, Portugal (Prof. Dr. Maria de Fátima Silva) hosted the conference.

The presentations at this conference are illustrative for changes in the approaches to ancient Greek drama, changes that had also been important themes in the intensive summer courses in Epidavros. It was these changes discussed in the summer course that informed or stimulated many of the presentations of the young researchers at this conference in Coimbra. In this introduction we give our impressions of the shifts in attitude towards the study of ancient Greek drama as experienced during the years that the intensive courses took place, which have led to a more open and less normative attitude towards the study of performances of ancient Greek drama. We focus on two overlapping problems: (a) the literary attitude towards ancient Greek drama, and (b) the question, who is responsible for communication within the theatre?

THE LITERARY ATTITUDE TOWARDS ANCIENT GREEK DRAMA

Ancient Greek drama has often been considered first as literature. As a consequence, theatre makers and scholars tend to consider the text as the dominant medium of expression and as the most important part of theatrical performances as well. The fact that music, songs and dance in the fifth century B.C. were also important theatrical means of expression has sometimes led to lively experiments with one or more of those theatrical means, which were normal ingredients in the ancient performances. While not all of those means are always used in theatre performances of ancient drama, an important change particularly in the last decades of

last century is that theatre makers are paying much more attention to those elements. However, the dominant tradition in the performance history of ancient Greek tragedy in the twentieth century has been and still is that the text is seen as the most important means of expression. Performances could be characterised as belonging to what in German is called ‘Sprechtheater’, or speech theatre. This also has to do with the fact that it is the text that is considered ‘classical’.

- *The notion ‘classical’*

The notion ‘classical’ is usually associated with terms such as ‘holy’, ‘eternal’, and ‘general’, and as representing *la condition humaine*. These associations are linked with the propensity of theatre makers to read the plays from the fifth century B.C. without questioning the political, social and aesthetic context in which these plays function. It is no wonder, then, that those plays are considered ‘eternal’ or as showing the general *condition humaine*, because the readers can only read and understand what they themselves put into the words. Projecting their own ideas about human conflicts into these plays gives the feeling that the plays are timeless. The readers are often not aware that they are doing this. On the contrary, they are convinced they hear the voices of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes.

In performance history, this means that theatre makers hesitate to change the text even when elements

of a text are not understandable for a non-specialist audience—for example, the long lists of gods, heroes or family members in the choral songs. Another consequence is that the implicit or explicit ideologies in the plays don't get attention. Also, performance aesthetics have often more to do with performance history since the 19th century, than the limited amount of sources about the performances in the fifth century B.C. indicates, which point more in the direction of danced operas than to psychological text drama. The fact that those aesthetics confirm the norms and values regarding ancient Greek drama from the view of the producers as well as from the spectators has made performances more a ritualized festive celebration than a process of theatrical communication. The idea that meanings and experiences are contained in the text is one of the misunderstandings of an approach that does not deal with theatre as a system of communication. Meanings and experiences are in the heads of producers and audiences who, with their frames of reference, encode or decode the verbal and non verbal signs.

- Norms related to ancient Greek drama

The view of ancient drama from the fifth century B.C. also has been obscured by Aristotle and Classicism. Aristotle introduced ideas about an ideal model of tragedy. The theatre practice of performing tragedies in the fifth century was, however, more diverse than this ideal model of suggests. The fifth century was in fact an age of dramaturgical and technological experiments

and innovations. The introduction of the second and third actor, the change from trilogies with an ongoing story line to trilogies with another type of connection between the three parts, the increasing diversity in the functions of the chorus, new organised recognition scenes, changes of location within a tragedy, spectacular effects such as the introduction of a crane (used for example in *Medea* and *Peace*) or the *ekkyklema* to show inner scenes—all were means the dramatists and theatre makers used to compete with their colleagues in theatrical contests at festivals. They led to an astonishing variety of dramaturgical communication means.

Classicism made the Aristotelian model of ancient tragedies even more rigid, and the number of tragedies organised around this model—particularly in the French and German speaking theatrical cultures—shaped ideas about ancient tragedies far into the twentieth century. The huge changes in versions of the myths (for instance, the *Medea* myth by Euripides) and in the dramaturgical treatments of the same myths (we only have to compare the versions of the *Electra*-theme by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides) show how the myths were used as templates. Deviations from familiar myths emphasized the moral, political, or social points of view the dramatists wanted to transmit. Not accepting adaptations of ancient Greek drama in fact represents an ideological position that is opposed to the practices of the ancient dramatists themselves.

cognition”¹¹. Most notably, the dedication of the play to French philosopher René Girard¹² (who was Mathews’ professor at Stanford University) announced an explicit intention to re-cognize in depth the dynamics of culture and the primacy of social order as these are shaped upon the genesis of all myth, hence, the genesis of tragedy. The scope of this reading of *Antigone*, steadily and forcefully underscored his belief that violence and barbarism are at the heart of the sacred, while it sought to understand its mechanisms as they appear in any sacrifice that restores order in society: in Antigone’s persistent sacrificial wish, in the militaristic regime at the outset of the play, in *the odd little breeze from the North* (3)¹³ reminding everyone of the *pro patria* sacrifices in Northern Ireland, or in the technological, emotional, social and political a-morality of modern power-states in the prophetic

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Girard, R. 1993. Most influentially René Girard has developed theories of sacrifice as a social process that take tragedy as a key example. For Girard, sacrifice- the central ritual of Greek religion- is to be seen as an institution that works to direct and control violence within the social group. In sacrifice, violence is sacralised and thus bounded by the rituals of religious observation. A surrogate, that is, a figure like the scapegoat which takes on itself the violence from within the group, is chosen as victim and is killed ritually. The crisis, the disorder, the violence, is avoided by such transference and such control. Tragedy is a dramatization -and thus ritualization- of the force of threatening, undifferentiated violence, a representation which displays the threat of disorder to expiate it. (“To know violence, is to experience it”, “tragedy is the child of sacrificial crisis”). This definition will assist in our understanding of Antigone’s death as a sacrifice, and her as scapegoat against Creon’s *realpolitik*.

¹³ I am personally indebted to the playwright for providing me with a copy.

Orwellian year 1984 (the year of its production) and beyond. In this version, *Anti-gone*, like the etymology of her name suggests, is an anti-heroine, or even a non-heroine. She opposes heroism and glory like she opposes her incestuous line of descent, her *genos*. In Mathews' version she even opposes tragedy.

The first line in Mathews' script blurs time and space, deliberately avoiding to place the action within a single cohesive historical moment: *Set in Ireland in the 1980s B.C., soon after Sparta had entered the war on the German side* (1), the play (which remains unpublished to this day) primarily prepares the audience for an illusionist trip, almost a kaleidoscopic view of history, the devastating effects of war, and the traumatic outcome of risky politics. This is a notion of time which occupies a dynamic, teleological character for several reasons: for one thing, it literally defines the temporal distance between fifth-century Athens and twentieth-century Ireland. Second, with the dyad Sparta-Germany as historical allusions, it reminds us of the catastrophic consequences of the Peloponnesian War and the Second World War, the latter echoing Theodor Adorno's aphorism for the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz. Writing against Adorno and in the same lines, Mathews' version fosters the view "that suffering has as much right to expression as a tortured man to scream"¹⁴. Heamon who has become Heman in Mathews' scenario, urges the Chorus into praxis: *We have an opportunity to collapse History. You and I together. To*

¹⁴ Quoted in Hall, E. 2004: 195.

begin all over. To resume time. To become totally human. To put all of this behind us[...]To step out of the soiled clothing of culture (5). Mathews' point seems to be that history is dead and that only myth has a recurring force: it always returns in times and places where (im)possibilities and (in)stabilities abound. His script contains a number of powerful signifiers most of which point to a political re-reading of *Antigone* as a meta-theatrical play: the theatre-within-theatre technique, the renaming of some of the characters, the distribution of copies of the Criminal Justice Bill to the audience- which was read at the end of the first act and during the intermission-, the purposeful juxtaposition of past and present time, the alteration of the traditional role of the audience and the direct communication between actors and spectators, all point to reworking of the myth both as a poetic drama and a theatre of experimentation in action.

Among the unhappy society of the play, the relationship of the police force to the city's ruler is considered in depth, even to quoting liberally from the controversial Irish Criminal Justice Bill, quotes that made many believe they were actually taken from George Orwell's *1984*. In the desolate modern landscape of the stage, his new characters gradually throw the ancient masks to uncover the delicate and dangerous distinction between role and self, private identity and public *persona*, tragedy and comedy: Antigone introduces her common, non-heroic self: *I represent ordinariness... tens of thousands of faceless women. Women who stand in queues and wait. And their waiting is more busy, more*

concentrated, than all the bustle of men (36). Mathews' *Antigone* operates as a way of talking about historical accountability through a radical critique of history (*The children are eating the stuffing out of old couches* (20)). As events unfold throughout his version, the constant reminder of the Chorus, *We're goin' round in circles* (12), underlines the inescapability of violence that is not only central to human history but crucial to it. Antigone is portrayed as a silent, passive young girl, tired of her cruel destiny (*I don't want to set an example* (12)) and acknowledges the position history has saved for her: *I know I'm colourless. I know I'm abrasive. I know I'm a bore. But I'm right, God help me, I'm right. And I have to go on being right until somebody sends help* (36).

A heavily pregnant Ismene reminds *Antigone* that it is her duty to *take the good with the bad* (17). A caricatured and submissive Heman, plays out the stereotype of the macho male: deploying the discourse of blind filial allegiance to Creon, and under the shade of a consistent misogyny, he degrades Antigone and condemns her deed. For Haemon Antigone was *axia timēs* (worthy of honor), but for Heman she lacks *nous/ noesis* primarily due to gender: *Such a waste. Such a squandering [...] You could have been my wife if you'd had any nous. You could have had me. Do you have any insight into what you've done to me* (49)? The dramatization of his apathy (*She's quite delusional. Why do I love her?* (18)) further articulates itself in a vulgar mocking of female nature: *You ride your own death in the female astride. You want to go out in a blaze of glory. Saint Antigone. Wafting*

off into cumulus nimbus while the rest of us stay where we are in the ruins. Walloping nails into wood [...] No wonder Christ chose men. Your sex is diseased (49).

President Creon who is the conscientious Minister for Justice proclaims: *The aim is rehabilitation. A bringing to the awareness of evil, not a driving to despair* (17). The playwright adds an ad-libbing one-man-show Chorus to replace the Theban elders, a Critic and Chora, and omits the messengers, the sentry, Eurydice, and Teiresias. Antigone's brothers are referred to as 'Polyneices' and 'Peteocles', and Antigone's transgression is writing the letter P on the walls of the city, standing for the first letter of both her brothers' names. Creon's edict at the beginning quotes the New Irish Criminal Justice Bill verbatim, and instead of leaving Polyneices unburied, he erases his existence from all the city's records. Antigone rebels because her brother has been reduced to a non-person and ends up in a psychiatric institution in order to be ideologically rehabilitated. The actors are actually all set for the last production of a Sophoclean play they have been rehearsing and performing for centuries. Worn out, they cannot remember their lines and covet each other's words. They have come to lose faith in themselves and their roles: *I've been playing this part for three thousand years. I can't remember why I took it. It wasn't like me. I'm so confused. I have the odd flash, but it's fainter all the time. What I'm doing is absurd. And they still don't understand. None of them. And neither do I* (10). But the show must go on: the drama must be revived all over again by people who

deplore injustice and the severity of the parts to which they have been assigned to. Antigone's martyrdom must "embroil the state in a fresh cycle of violence"¹⁵. The Chora, a smart character-invention of Mathews that in Greek means 'the country', flamboyantly exclaims: *To stay when Antigone comes? To participate in History? To have a seat at the centre of the epoch? To marry the era, and be impregnated by it? I'd do anything. I'd donate my kidneys* (31).

Throughout Mathews' play, Creon and Heman unite their masculine forces as father and son, and quite often seem to complement each other. In his quest for *the whole Truth* (22), Creon seeks forgiveness and pity for his past sins through Heman's reciting of famous philosophical aphorisms¹⁶. The conflict of the condition of man for Creon is a painful, nightmarish process of self-definition through and against Otherness, consequently through and against Antigone (*She's multiplying inside me like a white blood-cell* (32)). The fundamental structure of this conflict unfolds in Mathews with perfect economy, like in Sophocles' text. Antigone yet is immeasurably more direct in the way she defines lines

¹⁵ Scott, M. (1984) in the 'Programme Note for the *Antigone*': ii.

¹⁶ See *The Antigone*: 23. The focus is on the notion of freedom and democracy with references to Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, the patriotic American tradition of political pamphlets *The American Crisis* (1776-83) by Thomas Paine (who was ostracized for his atheism), and *What America Means to Me* by Pearl Sydenstricker Buck, the first American woman to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Creon records in his dictaphone: "I love it: "Those who expect to reap the blessings of freedom must, like men and women, undergo the fatigue of supporting it" found in Paine's influential text in defense of the Revolutionary War in America.

of kinship. *You're turning me into your own creation* (38)
 Antigone protests and Creon responds:

Go home my little playmate. Bury your brother. Don't bother me about him again. The ways of the tree are not to be understood by its leaves. Go home and breed. The kindergartens are empty. The swings are tied up. Not a single sandwich wrapper drifts across a single school-yard. The gulls have given up and gone away. Go home and breed. We need the noise of children like the noise in a stony place (41).

Mathews, also reads Antigone's myth as synonymous to "nonviolence" and "anti-theatre." In the meta-theatrical gesture of her suicide, Mathews' version reenacts the perpetual occurrence of a vicious circle of barbarism, *a state of total war since the murder of Cain* (51) in which all of us have and will keep on bearing witness to an intolerable horror. The action is set in a quasi-Beckettian no-man's-land: a vaguely post-nuclear location designed as a mass of drying concrete, a wrecked car, graffiti, a dying tree, sand and even a river running through the stage. It could be Stalingrad in 1943, St. Petersburg in 1917, Nagasaki in 1945, post-Criminal Justice Bill Ireland in 1984; any shattered culture. The backdrop of a devastated city is the forum in which all acts of violence and accusation are castigated, a modern civilization in ruins in which everyone else is blamed for one's mistakes. In this visual wasteland where torture is routine, *Antigone's* scoring propaganda is not the object. Indeed, the question seems to be: can there be martyrs without monsters? Mathews makes the point that there are no monsters, only victims,

only casualties and that “we’re all equally guilty or innocent in crisis situations over which we have no control”¹⁷. Our desire to find a monster is based on our need to take away our own guilt:

[Director Michael Scott] *had this terrible image of holocaust. But once I started translating I realized that it wouldn't work as we expected. I wasn't writing with conviction because I doubted the premise. It rested on a certain idea of heroism and individual glory. That you couldn't have a martyr without a monster; you couldn't make Antigone without debasing Creon. So, I thought of a play with no culprits and a great deal of casualties*¹⁸.

Consciously moving away from the idea of heroes and villains, this version resists categorization: simultaneously unstable and intact it “expiates,” in the writer’s words, the “shame” of the primary classical text by subverting “the very notion of a classic”¹⁹:

*“Antigone, like all the major tragedies of the Greek canon, exist in cowed form. It has been sedated by its own stature. The harm of its art has been drained from it. As a result, it's suffered a sea-change, a fate worse than death; it has become a classic. There are a great many reasons why this is a shame. For one thing, Antigone subverts the very notion of a classic, if by classic we understand a text which inscribes the meaning of history- and, indeed, the history of meanings- [...] Antigone, in fact, is the record of a part of an individual to assent to such practices”*²⁰.

¹⁷ Mathews, A. 1984b: 8.

¹⁸ Mathews, A. 1984c: 14.

¹⁹ Mathews, A. 1984d: 18.

²⁰ Ibid.

footed opposition' which in itself is the resolution, encapsulating the Hindu philosophy that *change* itself is the only constant.

Etymologically-speaking, confusion of the terms 'chastity' and 'celibacy' has long existed. 'Chastity' — deriving from the Latin *castitas*, meaning 'cleanliness' or 'purity' — did not, under either philosophical system, necessarily mean the renunciation of all sexual relations, but rather the temperate sexual behaviour as legitimate conjugal rights, for the purpose of procreation, or the sexual continence of the unmarried. One Greek word-equivalent for chastity, *sophrosyne*, means moderation, which in the ancient Greek world was a main philosophical virtue. This entailed proper self-mastery for men, and the virtue appropriate to a devoted and child-bearing (or potentially child-bearing) wife. It did not necessarily mean the avoidance of sex altogether. Hinduism's view on premarital sex is rooted in its concept of the stages of life. The first of these stages, known as *brahmacharya*, roughly translates as chastity.

In conclusion, I would summarise by drawing together the concept of 'duality as polarity' as being the necessary resolution of binary opposition: one cannot exist without the other. Specific characters in each of the works, by displaying a personification of such polarity, display each component of the binary opposition.

The following are some major components of the binary opposition found in *Hippolytus* (the majority of which also occur in *Vikramorvasiyam*):

1. man vs woman
2. lust vs rejection
3. virginity vs marriage
4. purity (Phaedra: of food; Hippolytus: of body)
vs pollution
5. resistance vs surrender
6. Cretan (outsider, lustful, mysterious) vs
Trozen
7. quasi-incestuous relationship between step-mother
and step child.
8. speech & silence opposition, on various levels:
 - social
 - sexual
 - revelation vs concealment
 - interior scenes vs exterior
9. Phaedra dying at the beginning, Hippolytus at
the end
10. a play about 'apparent duality': 2 women, 2
men, and 2 goddesses
11. *semnos* (being virtuous) and *sôphronein*
(chastity) meaning different things to different
characters.

Like *Vikramorvasiyam*, *Hippolytus* is complex play – nothing is what it seems. The ascetic ideal reflects a mode of thinking dividing the world into

Binary Oppositions of good/bad; male/female; being/becoming; reason/emotion; spirit/body; it then validates the poles of opposition and negates each other. French structural anthropologist Levi-Strauss argued that Binary Oppositions are at the heart of people's attempts to come to terms with reality.

The title of this conference, "Tragic heroines" could itself be interpreted in terms of this binary formulaic application: in the term 'heroine', we require the corollary of 'hero', 'villain' or 'other protagonist' against whom the heroine can be compared and contrasted. 'The tragic' (or consequences of the tragedy) requires some form of resolution: in *Hippolytus*, this could, in Sanskritic philosophy, be interpreted as the *enlightenment* of Theseus after the deaths of his wife and son. In *Vikramorvasiyam*, that *enlightenment* comes as the eventual choices that Urvashi and Pururavas make to remain on earth or return to heaven. In simplistic terms, both sets of characters are, under the terms of Greek tragedy, ultimately ruled by the play of gods in which they are all mere pawns.

Such an interpretation finds accord with the philosophy of Nietzsche who sought to encompass all opposites – all the clashing and conflict of life's multivalent urges - and to bring them together into an organic greater whole. This is not a harmony of resolving all tensions, but rather a celebration of dynamic tension itself, a celebration of the rhythm

and pulse of life that creates and destroys and creates again, in joy and sorrow, in a spirit of endless play.

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