correspondents at large

Tragedy Today

CAREY PERLOFF

IRONY AND TRAGEDY HAVE ALWAYS BEEN UNEASY BEDFELLOWS. THUS, IT IS NO SURPRISE THAT IN CYNICAL ERAS SUCH AS OURS, IN WHICH THERE are no moral absolutes, no clear beliefs, no accepted authority, and no commonly shared values or ethical norms, the act of producing a Greek tragedy requires a different lens. Even so, my recent experience shows that the plays continue to exert a peculiar hold on contemporary imaginations and can find startling resonances for modern audiences.

A classicist by training, I have directed a number of productions of the Greeks over the years, most recently my third outing of Sophocles's *Elektra*, at the American Conservatory Theater, in San Francisco. My first experience with the play was in 1988 at the Classic Stage Company, in New York, in Ezra Pound's relentlessly idiosyncratic version, written while he was incarcerated at St. Elizabeths Hospital. Twenty-two years later, I collaborated with Timberlake Wertenbaker on a new version mounted at the Getty Villa, outside Malibu, and then at the American Conservatory Theater. The question of willful remembering had become more acute and disturbing in the intervening years. In 1988, as I worked on the play, I felt quite certain that in Sophocles's eyes Elektra had right on her side and that the madness ascribed to her by the culture (and indeed by the chorus) was in fact powerful and crucial perseverance in the name of justice. By 2012, in the midst of the series of upheavals and revolutions that characterized the Arab Spring, my certainty had waned. It suddenly seemed to me that in Elektra's refusal to put her father's death to rest lay a truly destructive fixation and that the appetite for reprisal housed in her broken body was a frightening symbol for a culture gone awry. As I was contemplating this essay, I visited a photography show at the de Young Museum entitled *Eye Level in Iraq*, featuring war photographs from Iraq by Kael Alford and Thorne Anderson. One of the most horrifying images, to my mind, was of three women in burkas wielding machine guns against looters and rival factions in their Baghdad neighborhood. The photos depicted the repeated cycles of vendetta and tribal reprisal that have characterized the

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PMLA 129.4 (2014), published by the Modern Language Association of America

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.830 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Middle East for the past century and made me think acutely of *Elektra*. How might we apply the ethical arguments of Greek tragedy to shed light, for example, on the divisive tribalism of the contemporary Middle East (or on other, similar world conflicts)? Put another way, if all sides in a conflict hold seemingly equal and contradictory claims to their hegemony (or believe they do), whose takes priority? If Elektra's claim to justice is not absolute but is one among many, what is the weight of Sophocles's sense of moral imperative? Is the murder of Clytemnestra cathartic or horrifying or both? Is this a collective tragedy or simply Elektra's tragedy?

Much depends on how a director stages the final, controversial action of the play and how the chorus is characterized. For my most recent production, I took my cue from the personalized chorus of *Elektra* and embodied it in a single actress, Olympia Dukakis, rather than in a group of women. Being Greek as well as political, Dukakis spent a great deal of time in rehearsal wrestling with the justice of Elektra's claim against Clytemnestra, as the chorus urged Elektra to believe that Agamemnon's unjust murder would eventually be cleansed by his heroic son Orestes. But a strange thing happened as our rehearsals progressed. When the chorus is portrayed by a single woman, closer in age to Clytemnestra than to Elektra, her sympathies (and thus the sympathies of the audience) are more vulnerable to both sides of the argument. Dukakis found herself grieving with Clytemnestra over the brutal murder of the young Iphigenia and questioning the justice of Agamemnon's "sacrifice" to Artemis. Clytemnestra's vivid denunciations of a man who privileged his army mates over his family disconcerted an audience satiated with recent images of rape and other violence against women in the military. So although the audience's sympathies clearly began with Elektra and her insistence on avenging her father's murder, recent world events made it more difficult for the audience members to sustain this undiluted sympathy as the play progressed. By the time Orestes arrived, their



René Augesen as Elektra in Sophocles's *Elektra*, directed by Carey Perloff. American Conservatory Theater, October 2012. Photo courtesy of Kevin Berne.

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.830 Published online by Cambridge University Press

antennae were clearly alert: would this manchild convince them that the heroic thing to do was to kill the mother who had murdered his father? Again, it is difficult for us not to view Orestes's behavior through our own contemporary lens. However heroic we would like this young man to be, his behavior gives a modern audience pause: first he lies to his bereaved sister and pretends he is dead, and then, once he has revealed his identity, he silences her completely so that he can be free to do the deed alone. How ironic for a modern audience that the only way a man can achieve his goal in life is to make sure the women around him are quiet.

Sophocles never uses the word *matricide*, and he renders Orestes so deeply beloved in Elektra's eyes that we are drawn to him and his mission. But when he goes into the house to murder his mother, Sophocles again leaves the door open to multiple interpretations. The chorus and Elektra, our moral barometers throughout the play, take on a kind of bestial bloodlust. When she hears her mother scream, Elektra howls, "Strike her a second time!" while the chorus prowls the stage, panting for the final blow to land. After the deed has been done and Orestes brings out Clytemnestra's dead body to entrap Aegisthus, we are still swept up in the rush toward vengeance, rooting for our hero and heroine to complete the double murder and cleanse their house of pollution. But then what? As Orestes and Pylades reenter the house with the doomed Aegisthus, the chorus is left onstage to utter the final words of the Choral Ode:

> House of Atreus
> Free at last from your sufferings
> by this enterprise completed
> now.

What we discovered in 2012 was that no matter how much conviction Dukakis employed to deliver these lines, there was always a subliminal gasp of horror in the audience. Could the chorus honestly believe that this double murder had freed the House of Atreus from its sufferings? Had it indeed freed Elektra? Even in Sophocles's own time, the notion of vendetta was so absolute that the audience must have been prepared for the arrival of the Furies to wreak revenge on Orestes. But today the ending is even more bitterly ironic. Where is the moral imperative in clan warfare? Whose claim is the strongest? Who gets to adjudicate justice? Given that the West carved the Middle East into countries that make little sense in relation to the multiplicity of tribes, clans, and ethnicities that inhabit them, each of which believes it has the prior claim and the deepest sense of victimization, is the sacrifice of an individual to this cycle of vendetta tragic or foolish? This is the question of the modern *Elektra*.

Sophocles wrote no stage directions, so it is up to the director to determine the final stage picture of the play. Once her brother arrives, Elektra is effectively silenced. Our loquacious protagonist becomes a mute figure who watches her brother go into the house and do the deed she has worked to accomplish for over a decade. In the original production, did the actor playing Elektra exit the stage with the chorus at the end? Did Elektra go into the house with her brother? Or did she remain outside? In our production, after the chorus's final lines, Elektra was left alone onstage with the bleeding corpse of her mother. She stared, fixated, at the body, frozen in time. And then slowly she looked up, gazing out into the void. What was her future to be? Was this death a victory, in service of justice, or a mockery? The audience members had to decide for themselves. It is impossible to sustain moral certainty when a child is left to confront a dead parent; no matter how heinously the parent behaved, there is something elemental and powerful in the child's relationship to that dead body. Our contemporary audience regarded this image with dismay as it has regarded countless war photographs of family members who turned on

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.830 Published online by Cambridge University Press

one another in vendettas. The sight of a crime against family is horrific and unsettling.

This leads me back to my first question about memory and forgetting and in particular to the ways that memory serves tragedy. In the Sophoclean universe, to hold the memory of an injustice in one's ongoing consciousness is a heroic act. In today's world, it can be a form of psychosis. I recently directed *Scorched*, a modern tragedy by the Lebanese-Canadian writer Wajdi Mouawad that drew fascinating parallels between the civil war in Lebanon in the late 1970s and the collision of tribalism and law in Greek tragedy. One of the great speeches in the play is delivered by a doctor who is weary of treating wounded children brutalized by the endless cycle of violence. "Two days ago, the militia hanged three young refugees who strayed outside the camps," he says, in Linda Gaboriau's masterly English translation.

> Why did the militia hang the three teenagers? Because two refugees from the camp had raped and killed a girl from the village of Kfar Samira. Why did they rape the girl? Because the militia had stoned a family of refugees. Why did the militia stone them? Because the refugees had set fire to a house near the hill where thyme grows. Why did the refugees set fire to the house? To take revenge on the militia who had destroyed a well they had drilled. Why did the militia destroy the well? Because the refugees had burned the crop near the river where the dogs run. Why did they burn the crop? There must be a reason, but that's as far back as my memory goes, I can't retrace it any further, but the story can go on forever, one thing leading to another, from anger to anger, from sadness to grief, from rape to murder, back to the beginning of time. (55–56)

In such a world, would it not be heroic to cease the violence rather than to remember and repeat? How does one move from natural to positive law in a way that releases successive generations from having to fulfill their ancestral duties at the expense of civic order? Clearly, this was a theme close to the Greeks' hearts and is central to such plays as *Antigone*. But it has become a particularly complex and immediate issue today; politically, the inability to forget leads to endless destruction, while psychologically it leads to devastating mental disorders such as post-traumatic stress disorder and long-term anxiety. If forgetting is a part of healing, how do we deal with plays that privilege memory? We know that obsessive memory creates paralysis, whereas blanket forgetting creates a kind of blindness. Had Oedipus's memory of the murder of Laius been more precise and willfully remembered, for example, perhaps his tragedy could have been averted. But his ability to forget is the muscle that permitted Oedipus to move forward so effectively as a king and a healer. This question of the power and perils of memory is a rich vein to be mined in the exploration of tragedy.

In sum, I would argue that modern-day productions of Greek tragedy necessarily expose ambiguities and ironies probably not experienced by the original audience. We are a cynical culture with no predisposition to heroism, yet we are endlessly drawn to hero stories. We traffic in ever-smaller sound bites and have ever-shorter attention spans, yet we long for the catharsis of tragedy, for the quest for meaning that defines Greek dramaturgy. Although our reception of Greek tragedy is necessarily completely different from that of a fifth-century Athenian audience, it is a testament to the suppleness and scope of the original plays that they feel so immediate today while remaining so rooted in ancient soil.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2014.129.4.830 Published online by Cambridge University Press