
Americans Use Greek Tragedy: Great Expectations on Stage

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FOLEY HAS given us a useful, updated account of Greek tragedy in America.* She knows Greek, has taught Greek literature, has seen many plays, has written volumes of interpretations, and obviously has made this study her life's work. As she shows, this can be a frustrating business—the reason this review alludes to Dickens' novel (*Great Expectations*)—because of the exasperating difference that can arise between what one wants and what one gets, particularly when playwrights who know little Greek, less poetry, and care nothing about choral music and dance seek to “reimagine” Greek tragedy. The results can be tragicomic, if not tragic.

Having taught all of Greek tragedy, having translated it from the Greek (some with J. Michael Walton), and, since 1999, having had performances—in San Diego and around the world—of over thirty versions and translations, I have come to the conclusion that the original masterpieces still surpass all translations and versions, unless written by a true master of the theatre who has lived, eaten, and breathed theatre—like Racine, O'Neill, Cocteau, Anouilh, Soyinka, Furgard, or Friel.

The exceptions, then, are those playwrights who have read Greek tragedy (preferably in the original), understood the plays, and have been profoundly moved by them to the

*Helene Foley, *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage* (Sather Classical Lectures, v. 70; Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2012; A Joan Palevsky Book in Classical Literature), xv + 375 pages, \$95.00, hardcover. Page numbers following quotations in this review refer to Foley's book.

point that they render some sort of homage to them in their own creative masterpieces. We see this in a playwright of the caliber of Eugene O'Neill, for one example, in his 1924 *Desire Under the Elms* and 1931 *Mourning Becomes Electra*, or for another, Athol Fugard in *The Island*. The latter incorporates an abbreviated performance of Sophocles' *Antigone* by two prisoners on Robben Island, the prison that held Mandela and other blacks under appalling conditions simply for protesting their being treated as second-class citizens. As Antigone herself (in the person of the convict Winston) indicts the South African guards watching the play, there is a subtle parallel in the real prisoner being indeed a stand-in for Antigone: he himself has been walled up on Robben Island for having fought for the unwritten laws of the gods—which in 1994 did truly become written laws, after the first free election and the abolition of apartheid.

O'Neill reworked his own disastrous family life in both *Desire Under the Elms* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. He touched on the poverty and authoritarian power of the father in both, and the "mothers" in both are as mad as his own drug-addicted mother, whom he treated explicitly in *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (written in the 1940s but published in 1956). In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, his version of the *Oresteia*, he used the southern Civil War as his context. The poetry and music of the South offered both choral and racial commentary. In both *Desire* and *Mourning*, the fathers were more sinned against than sinning.

Foley deals briefly with O'Neill's plays but Fugard's *Island* is not included, although she discusses other versions from other countries performed in America.¹ Both Winston Tshona and John Kani won Tonys for their performances in Fugard's play on Broadway in 1975, so it's not as if *The Island* would have been some kind of exception in her schema.

A less welcome group of adaptations included are those written by academics and others who are not professional playwrights and who have not spent much time in the theatre; they exhibit dramatic judgement that sometimes is not

as honed as those with a career background in drama and theatre. Paralleling this, most non-theatrically-oriented academic reviewers and researchers are impressed by shock value rather than good writing, and what they cite can be singularly banal. Foley, who has an exemplary classical background, can bring a unique understanding to her critical reactions, and because of that this book is a welcome addition to the field. It's understood, of course, that she can't cover the entire field of what has appeared on the American stage, though (as I pointed out, certain items really should have gotten between the covers of this book).

In 2000, Jack O'Brien, the head of The Old Globe theatre in San Diego, commissioned me to do a version of *Trojan Women* to usher in the millennium. It was to be a play by a woman, about women, and directed by a woman (Seret Scott), that celebrates peace. In her staging, Scott added allusions to the Vietnam War, and the character of Helen was rewritten from a feminist point of view to show her as merely an excuse for a war that men wanted to fight anyway. Cassandra was cast and directed as a colored voodoo queen who terrified the soldiers by predicting their grim futures. (In 2011, the actress who played this role, Rayme Cornell, subsequently took a rap version of it to Las Vegas.) Talthylbius, the army's messenger, was suffering from post-traumatic stress, and definitely didn't want to be told by a mad voodoo witch about how he would die. He claimed he detested delivering the messages that he was ordered to deliver from the Greek army to the women. War had taken its toll on him:

I have to admit though there are things about this war that bother me. I know a good soldier's not supposed to think, but just obey orders. I always try not to question our leaders. They know best. We *had* to go to war. But there were a lot of losses. All those dead bodies. It's hard to sleep now. I keep seeing them. Flesh and blood everywhere, and the stink of it! No one talks about how war smells. But bodies have guts for God's sake. When you blow a per-

son up there are consequences. One stink turns into another stink the longer they rot. You vomit. The bodies should be buried, but there is never time for that.

For national security this war is a good thing, but I have to wonder if my nightmares are worth it. I have headaches now. I just want to live my life with my wife and kids. No complications.

All I want now is to get home. War? Forget it. That's what I want. To forget.

I also rewrote *Alcestis* into a play called *The Ally Way* (2004) and had *Alcestis* (Ally/Allison) ultimately indicting misogyny throughout history.²

Foley mentions my *Medea*, *Queen of Colchester* (2003) set in South Africa and in Las Vegas, with an all male cast and *Medea* as a colored drag queen, with rap music for the chorus.³ Here Jason “colonizes” *Medea* as other whites did South Africa.

Foley has five main chapters: “Greek Tragedy Finds an American Audience”; “Making Total Theatre in America: Choreography and Music”; “Democratizing Greek Tragedy”; “Reenvisioning the Hero: American Oedipus”; “Reimagining *Medea* as American Other.” This is followed by eclectic appendices of productions—both originals and versions—of: (a.) Sophocles’ and Euripides’ *Electras*; (b.) *Antigone*; (c.) Aeschylus’ *Persians*, Sophocles’ *Ajax*, and Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*; (d.) *Oedipus Tyrannus*; (e.) *Medea*; (f.) Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigeneia in Tauris*; and (g.) a catchall of other productions and versions. During the last thirty years, many of these chapters have led to volumes treating their subjects, including even what makes a version or a translation American.⁴

Foley rightly notes that Greek tragedy has to communicate to modern audiences, one of which is the American. Productions have often offered further commentary on some contemporary problem; Foley cites “war, slavery, race, the status of women, religion, identity and immigration” (xiv).

Early on, Foley notes that Americans are somewhat addicted to solutions, and quotes William Dean Howells to Edith Wharton: "What the American public wants is a tragedy with a happy ending." This attitude has led to the proliferation of musicals and comedies on Broadway, and other theatrical narcotics to "sell" and keep their audiences happy.

The economic bottom line is what drives theatre in America, over the more highly subsidized theatres in Germany, France, and England; much Asian and African theatre has also succumbed to this economic bottom line. And Greek tragedy costs money if one stages it with choruses, dance, and music.

The early periods (roughly, before 1880) reflect some of the conservative reactions that, for example, barred Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, with its theme of incest, even from the British commercial theatre for so long (1910). Besides a puritanical reaction towards theatre in these early periods, the social engagement of Greek tragedy also conflicted with American "independence."

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries melodrama flourished, providing the requisite happy endings with evil punished and virtue rewarded. The Depression didn't help theatre as people struggled to survive. Then the McCarthy-era witch-hunts also shaped fears about "progressive" theatre and anything else that might question government policies, or that reeked of "communism." In the 1960s and '70s, after Vietnam, Greek tragedy finally found its place, since by then America had to acknowledge some of its own failures after the glories of World War II. It would seem, during the anti-war reaction, that Euripides was the preferred playwright.

In her introduction, Foley begins with a description of various plays that deal with the Electra themes, claiming that the story of Electra in particular, along with the myths of Medea and Oedipus, struck the American fancy. She claims that Electra as a victim of injustice appealed to the American imagination and fit the earlier melodrama, though many re-

views did not particularly like the brutal revenge theme. The dysfunctional family, however, did have an appeal, and O'Neill certainly represented that in his *Mourning Becomes Electra*, set in a Civil War context, and thus touched American sensibilities.

Foley points out the madness in O'Neill's play in comparison to the Aeschylean original, with hints of incest—which also have been attributed to the original, but certainly not as explicitly as in O'Neill. Freud seems to have influenced him as much as Aeschylus. The American Civil War also indirectly reflected the hostilities of the American family itself, pitting the North against the South, and often brother against brother.

Foley notes that *Mourning's* Electra also appealed to feminist attitudes, showing a woman being oppressed by patriarchy. I am not convinced that O'Neill's Electra is a good example of feminism opposing patriarchy, since his Electra is totally devoted to her father, and then after her father's death, to her brother, whom she relentlessly tries to shape into her father's image. One reviewer noted, though, that O'Neill focuses his version on Electra, letting her enter into her full tragic role (very different from, say, Euripides' version that has Castor as *deus ex machina* assign her to be Py-lades' wife). Can one claim, though, that in O'Neill's version her feminist "victory" amounts to spending her life in mourning, since that seems to be her final choice?

One rather nonsensical version is Yuval Sharon's 2004 *The Mourners*, "part of a new version of the *Oresteia* at Theatre Faction in New York. The audience see a tentative Orestes emerge from a sandpit, representing Agamemnon's grave in center stage, with no less than four compelling Electras imprisoned in a rec room" (13). Another was Chaikin's 1974 and 1976 versions that reduced the play to three characters, Electra, Clytemnestra and Orestes, and combined versions of Sophocles, Euripides, and Hofmannsthal. Then there was another 1974 feminist version, *Electra Speaks*, by the Woman's Experimental Theatre (WET). Some of the text is quoted:

She tugs	She belches
She lugs	She is passing air
She heaves	She is breathing.

(21)

These versions are often given as much space as the greats, like O'Neill. Well, at least the feminist theme predominates.

Other versions like Luis Alfaro's *Electricidad* (2004) reflect the Hispanic population, with a type of assertion that might be construed as feminist (fighting against patriarchy). This is Electra speaking:

I want to live the old cholo ways, Papa
 Simple and to the point.
 You mess with me, I mess with you back.
 You want to party, party in your own back yard.
 You shoot, I shoot back.

(23)

Many of the idiomatic versions Foley cites I find lack the poetry of the originals, and also the complexity of the issues. At one point, she quotes Edgar Allan Poe opining that in the United States "the intellect of an audience can never safely be fatigued by complexity" (27). If that truly is the case, then Greek tragedy is certainly a national challenge—as the two quotations above suggest.

Foley also deals with Medea as a figure of mature cultural identity needing to be Americanized for the native stage, and an Oedipus who in turn is still in search of his full identity. She also includes plays that address political issues by way of Greek tragedy, confronting "current issues about national identity through a dialogue with a fictional past" (26).

Particularly idiosyncratic is Foley's account of "notable" actresses and actors in modern versions of Greek tragedy, like the talented Margaret Anglin, who "ignited the greatest interest in Greek tragedy on the American stage during the first quarter of the twentieth century and defined standards of performance for the production of the original plays in

her era" (47). She carried on the European stagecraft of Gordon Craig, Max Reinhardt, and Adolphe Appia, whose names are much more familiar than hers. Her 1913 *Electra* was especially known by the way night after night "the Greek maidens ran shrieking out of the theatre into the surrounding night" and how, according to one reviewer, her *Electra* "uncoiled . . . like a steely, terrific snake . . . a-glimmer with the splendid, poisonous colors of lurid hate" (53). Fourteen pages are dedicated to her, whereas Eugene O'Neill is given three. Did not Judith Anderson's *Medea* performances have a greater impact? She is mentioned on five pages of the book.

These can be read as quibbles, since to learn about important work in the early stagings of American versions of the classics is valuable, no question. Anglin, of Irish ancestry, sounds very much like Martha Graham (also Irish), who defined dramatic values in her danced renditions of Greek tragedy, and thereby introduced something of the totality of theatrical experience for American audiences.

In essaying to assess Graham's influence (her "legacy"), Foley even cites Amy Greenfield's 1990 film, a feminist version, *Antigone: Rites for the Dead*, in part because she used Bertram Ross, one of Graham's dancers, in the roles of both Oedipus and Creon.

Sophocles' *Antigone* lends itself so much better to an apt feminist interpretation than *Electra* does, as I mentioned in a talk/prologue/epilogue that I gave for the DVD that Greenfield produced. When she spoke to my classes at UCSD, she underlined this, stressing the feminist defiance she wished to convey, besides settings that conveyed the emotional states.

The settings Greenfield used in upper New York State reflect both the lush relationship of Oedipus with his daughters and also the sterile setting in which Creon tries to impose his will on his family. More generally, the values of the family that oppose the laws of the city are embodied in the locations Greenfield chose for her film. Creon, who was in his sterile palace at the beginning, is forced to enter a cave, which symbolically *realizes* a coming-to-terms with the

power that women had, which he had underestimated to his peril. And there is the final, memorable image of a triumphant Janet Eilber who as Ismene embodies feminist triumph, after Creon has been defeated by his sorrow over losing both wife and son.



FOLEY NOTES TWO important facts about O'Neill's plays, namely the importance of *how* failure is achieved, and then how everyone wears an invisible but discernable mask that audiences should remove by virtue of the clues the playwright gives to motivation. She quotes from Törnqvist's study showing how O'Neill in his own words recognized that *committed* failure was as important as success if it was motivated by passion: "A man wills his own defeat when he pursues the unattainable. But his struggle is his success" (71). Many have said the same of Sophocles' Oedipus, but character after character in O'Neill fails mainly out of psychological weakness, something that O'Neill saw in his own alcoholic and drug ridden family. As Arthur and Barbara Gelb (who are cited by Foley) saw, for O'Neill, "the people who succeed and do not push on to greater failure are the spiritual middle classes." However static O'Neill's work might have appeared to some critics, however much action might be stalled by psychology, Foley admits that "*Mourning* in particular was responsible for O'Neill's Nobel Prize in 1936 and became a classic taught in American schools regularly through the end of the Second World War."

These plays then ceded to those of the 1960s and 1970s with their very different avant-garde approaches. Choreography and music became even more important and led to varying approaches, even new operas: see *Gospel at Colonus* by Lee Breuer and Bob Telson; and Harry Partch's 1952-61 *Oedipus Tyrannus* and his 1960 *Revelation in the Courthouse Park*, which is modeled on the *Bacchae*.⁵ Then there were the less traditional "operas": *Hillbilly Antigone*

(2005), *The Rockae* (2007), and Will Power's hip-hop *The Seven* (a male chauvinist fantasy which saw most women as "hos" and lost all the sensibility of Aeschylus' original; it was neither accurate hip-hop, nor an entertaining rendition of Greek tragedy).

Foley includes Robert Wilson's *Alcestis* as a way an audience may "experience a different relation between the visual and oral aspects of tragedy." Wilson makes a version that is visual and aural pastiche underlining ambiguity, as most of his productions do, while eschewing coherent spoken language. He concludes *Alcestis* with a Kyogen farce, *Birdcatcher in Hell*, which allows the birdcatcher Kiyoyori to return, after the underworld gods are satisfied by the food he brings. This seems a variation on the Orpheus theme, and here replaces Heracles' wrestling Death to win Alcestis' return. As usual, Wilson does nothing to elucidate, or pay anything close to a literal homage to the original, but Foley says that the "stunning visual and aural magnitude on a mythic scale . . . remains consonant with the play's serious if ambiguous treatment of mortality and sacrifice." (120)

Wilson, however, renders visual aspects in such a way as to give a new interpretation. Andrei Both, a distinguished Professor of Design, comments: "Visually speaking Wilson is idiosyncratic and remarkable. Also the way he uses the spoken words as sounds loaded with meaning, bodies in space, is fascinating."

Werner Herzog also appreciates landscapes and silences, and his films are the opposite of the Hollywood action film, but demand patience and commitment from his audience, and I find that one is well rewarded by this approach. He has also directed a film in 2009, from a screenplay that he and Herb Golder did, which in its own way is a reworking of the *Oresteia*, about a real story of a student playing Orestes and then going home and actually murdering his mother; the title of the film is what his mother says when he stabs her with his Samurai sword: "*My Son! My Son! What Have Ye Done?*"⁶

Foley also looks at the ways Americans make Greek tragedy democratic and politicize their versions. Foley quotes Robbe-Grillet: "The very notion of a work created for the expression of a social, political, economic, or moral content constitutes a lie. . . . Once there appears the concern to signify something (something external to art) literature begins to retreat, to disappear" (122). I would say further it destroys a play, which then becomes a tract.

A further point with which to take issue might be when Foley notes that economic issues have "frequently confined the audience for legitimate drama to the moneyed and educated, who often attend theatre to be entertained rather than challenged." Moneyed, maybe, but does not education lead to the cultivation of taste?

The Federal Theatre Project (1935–39) featured a *Trojan Incident*, based on Euripides' *Trojan Women* that reflected the consequences of fascism. Julian Beck and Judith Malina's The Living Theatre, Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater, and Richard Shechner's The Performance Group all featured Greek tragedy with a political thrust. Ezra Pound's *Women of Trachis* (1960) rightly went down in critical flames.

Brecht's *Antigone* was obviously political since it, along with Anouilh's *Antigone*, criticized fascism. Brecht made Antigone a political symbol, and Anouilh, for whatever reason, made her a silly twit more interested in the latest hair-style than in burying her brother. But I did find Anouilh's version, showing Creon's total political thrust, much more entertaining than Brecht's.

Brecht does have powerful anti-fascist commentary, exposing how everyone is complicit in what happens in those types of regimes. The Becks' Living Theatre was aimed at the Vietnam War in the 1960s. In the 1980s, Foley notes, the topics were more "nuclear war, environmental disaster and patriarchal expression." These were conveyed by Robert Brustein, who also observed that The Living Theatre's productions were like revival meetings (137), evanescent however intense their quasi-religious fervor. As Foley notes,

“under the influence of their interpretation of Antonin Artaud, the Becks included chants, laments, shrieks, hums, imitations of wind, and a period of forty-five minutes in which the chorus celebrated Dionysus by dancing to the sound of tongue clacking and thigh slapping” (135).

Neither Brecht nor Anouilh has the feminist appeal that Sophocles had, but even the original creates an Antigone who is hardly flawless. Both she and Creon share the failing of being unable to compromise, so Creon is punished by having his family destroyed, whose values he underrated, and Antigone is destroyed by her uncompromising civil disobedience and (like her father) her hot temper, which prevented her from being rescued when Tiresias finally made Creon see the light. Her impatience led to a hasty suicide.

Another political dimension was offered by Peters Sellars and Robert Auletta’s version of Aeschylus’ *Persians* (1993), written to protest the First Gulf War. Sellars clearly indicts not only this war, but anticipated the failed intelligence about the weapons of mass destruction that led to the next war. Crucial was a distinction that Sellars made between the media: “Television permits you to be a spectator, but theatre makes you a participant” (140). This certainly was the reason for his producing an earlier *Ajax* (1986), another indictment of the militant policies of the United States. This production was particularly powerful, with Howie Seago, a deaf-mute actor playing the role of Ajax, who first appears in a plastic box sloshing around in bloody water.⁷ Foley covers other productions of *Ajax*, most of which deal with the Iraq War.

Sellars returned with his 2005 *Children of Heracles* at the ART in Cambridge, Massachusetts. This dealt with all the refugees since the recent Middle East wars, as well as the Hispanic immigration problems in the United States, to boot. Conscience is at issue again and again in his dramatic reinventions of the ancient Greeks, and Sellars, as usual, has informative as well as scathing political remarks on offer: “The Greeks invented democracy and theatre almost at the same moment—and not by accident. They knew you had to

have a place where you can discuss difficult questions at a high level. And that will never be the Senate” (153). His ending of this play was ambivalent because Eurystheus, the protector of the immigrant children, was clothed “in the bright orange overalls of a Guantánamo detainee as he stood behind a transparent acrylic shield.” What might Sellars, under the guise of Greek theatre, have to say about assassinations carried out in foreign countries by Americans, and about drone killings too? A variation of *les Mouches* as drones? Assassination of Neoptolemus (a bin Laden stand in) at Delphi by the American Hermione’s plots?

Foley gives several examples of *Prometheus Bound* revived in the United States, following (the American) Eva Palmer Sikelianos’ famous danced production that opened the Delphi festival in May 1930. It was first staged in New York as a benefit to raise money for the Greek performance.

Jonathan Miller directed a Yale production of *Prometheus* with a prose text by Robert Lowell, but for all the stars it was so eclectically opaque (with Hermes as an SS officer and Hephaistos as a crippled Negro) that it had only a short life. Many productions in the United States have protested the abuse of technology (e.g., the atomic bomb from Promethean fire). Richard Shechner’s *The Prometheus Project: Four Movements and a Coda* was even more explicit about the abuse of power with the atom bomb, coupling it with the abuse of women (Io). Foley notes the difficulty reviewers had with connecting Hiroshima and sexual abuse (perhaps the Japanese were raped by the Americans? Some might claim that). In America, the Japanese were shown in cartoons as relatives of the apes and as inferior to civilized Americans, exactly the same construction the British, justifying their colonization, used to represent the Irish as well as the Australian aborigines, not to mention Indians in India. (I omit representations of blacks by whites in South Africa, and Americans’ own experience of representing the native Americans’ need to be civilized by white immigrants from Europe.)

Greek tragedy also showed how “barbarians” interacted with civilized Greeks—who in Euripides often turned out to be less civilized than the “barbarians” they were oppressing: see his *Trojan Women* and *Medea*. (My version of *Trojan Women* in 2000 made this relationship explicit.)



FOLEY THEN TURNS to the American Oedipus. She points out how the American desire for the hero to be successful is frustrated by his tragic end. In Minneapolis, the Guthrie Theatre’s 1972 production was notable for its chants and for vocal droning borrowed from “Pygmy, Coptic, Greek Orthodox and Tibetan chants, as well as Middle Eastern prayer.” The Christ-as-scapegoat parallel became obvious, along with the renewing “year-spirit,” made famous in Tyrone Guthrie’s 1957 production of Yeats’ *Oedipus* in Stratford, Ontario. Oedipus became “the anthropologist’s Sophocles,” an unclean beast that had to be sacrificed for civilized life to go on.

In 1987, Reza Abdoh, an Iranian who had claimed that “the entire progress of our culture is based on violence and destruction,” presented a *King Oedipus* in Los Angeles. Abdoh’s claim is actually very close to Nietzsche’s, that “the noble human being does not sin, the profound poet wants to tell us: though every law, every natural order, even the moral world may perish through his actions, his actions also produce a higher magical circle of effects which found a new world on the ruins of the old one that has been overthrown.”

Abdoh’s version ended ritualistically with Asian music and a whirling dance. Oedipus is heard thumping with his staff, and Foley claims he was reduced to the level of bare survival. By contrast, Foley notes an Oregon production that paid homage to Bernard Knox’s more optimistic view, that Oedipus was “the symbol of the polis rising above a sea of troubles.” However, Knox claimed that Oedipus paralleled Athens’ own rise and fall: “Athens pursued, throughout the

course of Sophocles' manhood and old age, its stubborn, magnificent course to the final disaster. It was, like a Sophoclean hero, in love with the impossible."⁸ For Knox, however magnificent the Sophoclean hero might be, his end was still tragic.

Foley also covers the sharper political dramas, like *Oedipus Nix*, a burlesque by Robert Brustein in 1974 that drew the parallel between Nixon and Oedipus, and the Watergate scandal. In 2001, the plague of AIDS was made explicit in the Hartford *Oedipus*, directed by Jonathan Wilson with an African-American cast (Adrienne Wilson reworked the Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald translation). This production, set in Africa with African music, was meant to combat the denial by South Africa that there was a problem (one remembers Jacob Zuma's famous remark of his having intercourse with a woman who had AIDS, but without any problem because he showered afterwards). Some reviews criticized this production for its racist stereotypes, and for also seeming to be in denial that AIDS was a problem not only in the United States but all over the world.

Robert Woodruff's 2004 ART Production indicted the false election of George W. Bush (the Florida fiasco) and the sickness of his regime (and also the country) as a parallel to the plague because the United States declared war on another state for the illusory possession of WMD. This was not explicitly said in the play, but implied, as David Foucher said in his review (quoted, 172): "Draw your parallels to the historical arrogance of the United States on the contemporary political stage, and it is quite easy to deduce that Woodruff's metaphor is decidedly anti-American."⁹

Foley covers more experimental versions, many of which died natural deaths. There were also parodies, which show Americans' typical send-up of the hero, like Tom Lehrer's "Oedipus Rex." It parodies the ponderous film version of *OT* directed by Sir Tyrone Guthrie. The final verse in Lehrer's song sums it up:

His rivals used to say quite a bit
 But as a monarch he was most unfit
 But still in all they had to admit
 That he loved his mother.

(187)

Peter Schickele's *Oedipus Tex* (music by P. D. Q. Bach) parodies the cult of the cowboy, and concludes with this sage advice (that at least my son followed, who runs the Listowel Equestrian Center in Listowel, Ireland):

Well, the moral of this story is, of course:
 Don't love your mother, pardner,
 save it for your horse.

It seems a cowboy in the western can get rid of threats, and at the end ride away rather like Oedipus in *OC*, but ruling wisely seems to be beyond him. These comic Oedipus figures don't reach the heights (or depths) of Eddie in Steven Berkoff's *Greek* (1980). This has been performed several times in America. Eddie finds he is married to his mother (the Mum that is indeed his queen), and it suits him just fine. Seems that solution suits the British better, whereas the American cowboy can be satisfied with his horse, particularly if there's a Tonto to ride with out of town. National characteristics can surface in versions of Greek tragedy.



FOLEY ALSO COVERS versions or productions of *Medea* with the heroine as Americans' other. She was also the Greek other, and one of the defining barbarians on the Greek stage to show that the theoretically civilized Greeks could be the true barbarians (as we've also noted in Euripides' *Trojan Women*, *Andromache*, and others). In many European productions, *Medea* has been played by a black woman to explicitly convey "the other."

Foley cites productions starring Diana Rigg in 1994 (who did her usual avenger's performance in this role), Fiona

Shaw in 2002 (quite powerful), and Irene Papas (1973), directed by Minos Volonakis (she also had good reviews). Foley notes and wonders why this is America's most popular Greek tragedy. She then speculates, and probably rightly so, that it was such a great vehicle for actresses, particularly in the Robinson Jeffers version (he not only wrote his play for Judith Anderson personally but worked on it in discussions with her). There are archival recording of productions of Judith Anderson as Medea, and then Zoe Caldwell in the role as Anderson aged—but Anderson plays the nurse powerfully in that 1982 production.

This also is a play about justice and injustice, and honor. Too many, as Foley also notes, emphasize sexual jealousy as Medea's primary motive, but she is like a Homeric hero in avenging her honor, as Bernard Knox well pointed out.¹⁰ Medea obviously appeals to feminists. I called her the first terrorist: her children were collateral damage to her vengeance, but for many of my students (mainly women), she could do no wrong. She is truly an American heroine in this sense.

There also were cases in America where mothers killed their children. Foley cites Margaret Garner, an escaped slave woman, who tried to kill herself and her children so that they could be free at least in death. Foley cites a poem by Frances E. W. Harper that construes child murder as "the profoundest act of maternal love." Toni Morrison used this in her novel *Beloved*. This act of maternal love characterized Medea in the nineteenth century. In the 1930s and '40s Medea became a social critic—in Countee Cullen's 1935 adaptation, for example, and Langston Hughes' 1935 *Mulatto*. Foley claims that Maxwell Anderson's *Wingless Victory* (1936) and Robinson Jeffers' 1947 *Medea* "raised questions about American economic rapacity, religious values, and complacent cultural preconceptions." Euripides also was complaining about the Greeks in his original.

From the 1970s to the present, some productions have been set in the Caribbean (Ernest Ferlita's 1976 *Black Medea*, Steve

Carter's 1990 *Pecong*, and Michael La Chiusa's *Marie Christine*). Cherrie Moraga's *Hungry Woman* (2000) is a Native American Chicana version. There are Asian ones: Carol Sorgenfrei's *Medea: A Noh Cycle Based on Greek Myth*, and *Kabuki Medea* (1984) by William Missouri Downs and Lou Anne Wright, directed by Shozo Sato with traditional Kabuki music. Velina Hasu Houston wrote her powerful *Kokoro* (1985) and *House of Chaos* (2007);¹¹ the former was based on the true story of a betrayed Japanese war bride, who tried to drown herself along with her daughter, but only succeeded in drowning the daughter. *House of Chaos* is about a fashion house, in which the two women who were rivals collaborate to destroy Jason.

Then there is Sung Rno's *wAve* (2004). Rno described his plot as "Japanese anime meets the Simpsons" (222). It is too complicated to recount, with characters turned into CD-ROMs and the like, but the technologically-oriented husband Jason is left in darkness at the end, I suppose the ultimate hell for a techie.

In 2004, Roger Kirby's *Medea in Jerusalem* had a Palestinian Medea confront an Israeli Jason; Medea sends her children to Jason's wedding carrying bombs in a backpack.

Foley rightly concludes that *Medea* is a catchall for issues of the moment, and that can be the reason for its popularity in America. Much as Medea invites versions, nonetheless I still feel nostalgic for the powerful original, with its dramatic clarity and inimitably brilliant poetic language.

In her epilogue, Foley shows that Greek tragedy has "frequently responded to national aspirations." It also frequently documented its failures. Foley keeps trying to bring American optimism into these productions, together with a recognition of "women's growing but still problematic move into the public world" (237). Would that that were so. I agree with her that Greek tragedy has given us some of the most powerful women in drama, and in that respect has never been surpassed. Foley's book is a very useful updating of performances of classical drama in America, and a thoughtful analysis of the reasons why they are important.

NOTES

1. E.g., Diana Rigg's *Medea*, translated by Alistair Eliot, 1994, on Broadway. For Fugard's *Island* see *The Craft of Athol Fugard* (Los Angeles 2013) and for other versions of the classics by Fugard that also appeared in the United States, see my "The Return of Myth: Athol Fugard and the Classics," *Arion* 14.2 (Fall 2008), 21–47, and "Black Antigone and Gay Oedipus: Postcolonial Dramatic Legacies in the New South Africa," *Arion* 17.1 (Spring/Summer, 2009), 25–51. The latter essay treats two plays that toured in the US, the first by Fugard, *The Island*, and the second by Ashraf Jahaardien, *Happy Endings are Extra*.

2. Directed by Douglas Lay, performed at Sixth at Penn Theatre, San Diego (2004). It was more feminist than Robert Wilson's version by far.

3. Directed by Kirsten Brandt, performed at Sledgehammer Theatre (2003).

4. I am contributing to the forthcoming *Oxford Handbook of Dance and Theatre*: "Dancing Drama: Ancient Greek Theatre in Modern Shoes and Shows," and *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Aeschylus*: "Avatars of Aeschylus: O'Neill to Herzog/Golder," and just published "Sophocles Made New: Modern Performances" in *Brill's Companion to Sophocles*, Andreas Markantonatos, ed. (Leiden 2012).

5. See my *Sing Sorrow: Classics, History, and Heroines in Opera* (Westport, CT and London 2001) with an extensive appendix that lists operas and demi-operas based on the classics from 1601 to 2000. There are, of course, omissions. My experience here allows me to appreciate Foley's own omissions.

6. See note 4. This is the Herzog/Golder work, which I shall address in that volume along with O'Neill's play.

7. See my chapter on this play, "Peter Sellars' *Ajax*: The Obsolescence of Honor," in *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage* (New York 1992), 75–88.

8. Bernard Knox, *The Heroic Temper*, Sather Classical Lectures 35 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1964), 60–61.

9. See my "Translating *Antigone*: Staging Anti-Colonial Protests," *Counterpunch*, Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair, eds. (March 24/25, 2007), 1–15. My American production of *Antigone* had Creon making his first speech to the people celebrating Thebes' victory in front of a backdrop of Greek-like letters reading "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED." Greek tragedy in the United States has often been produced as political protest.

10. B. M. W. Knox, "The *Medea* of Euripides," *Yale Classical Studies* XXV, 193–225.

11. See *The Myth Strikes Back: Medea Plays by Women*, Marianne McDonald and Velina Hasu Houston, eds., forward by Athol Fugard (Los Angeles, forthcoming).