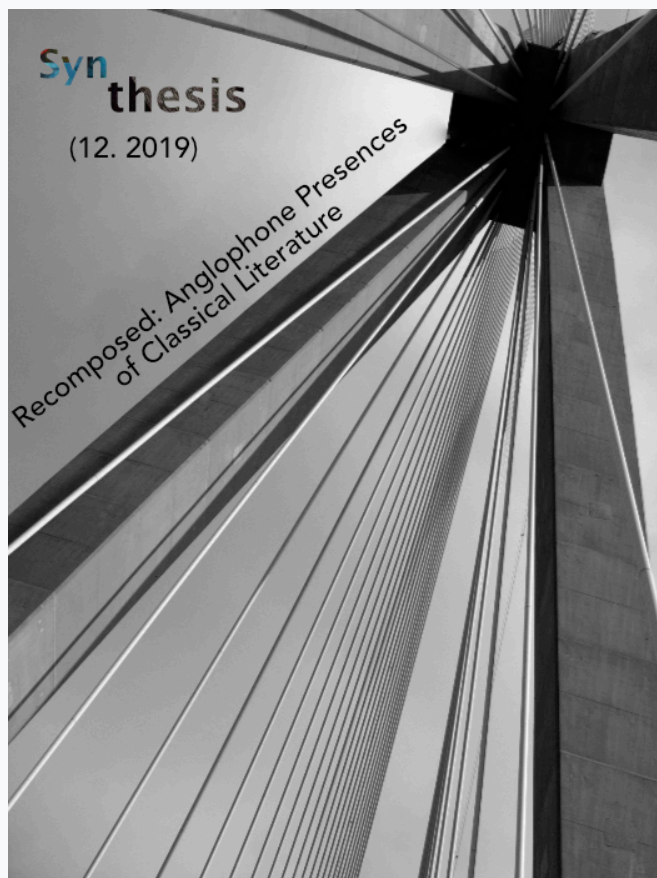


Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 12 (2019)

Recomposed: Anglophone Presences of Classical Literature



Greek Tragedy and Trauma Retold in Three New Translations

Lucy Jackson

doi: [10.12681/syn.25260](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.25260)

Copyright © 2020, Lucy Jackson



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Jackson, L. (2020). Greek Tragedy and Trauma Retold in Three New Translations. *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies*, (12), 103–109. <https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.25260>

Greek Tragedy and Trauma Retold in Three New Translations

Lucy Jackson

Aeschylus. *The Suppliant Women*. In a version by David Greig. London: Faber and Faber, 2017. Paperback. pp. 46. £ 9,99.

Euripides. *Bakkhai*. A new version by Anne Carson. New York: New Directions Publishing, 2017. Clothbound. pp. 96. \$16,95.

Euripides. *The Iphigenia Plays. New Verse Translations*. Translated by Rachel Hadas. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern UP, 2018. pp. 176. \$18,95.

There seems to be a particular urgency to world events today –the political status quo upended, catastrophic fires, hurricanes, pandemics (the results of humankind’s hubris), or ruptures in national identity and the conflicts that ensue. Many believe that it is this urgency that has prompted the desire to return to fundamentals, to seek wisdom in antiquity. Facing the wild and tragic events taking place daily, whether they appear on a global stage or privately, quietly in our own homes, is a more or less explicit concern for all three of the translators reviewed here. In the introduction to her new verse translations of Euripides’s two Iphigenia plays, Rachel Hadas draws attention to the way the characters tell and retell the stories of how they came to be in their current situation. She says, “Often there’s the sense of a trauma retold, not so much to air old grievances as simply to bring horror to light –to give nightmarish events, or even events that really were dreams, meaning by casting them into language” (Hadas x). Just as histories of trauma are narrated by characters in the tragedies themselves, so these translators encourage us to address our very present fears and give them ‘meaning by casting them into language.’

David Greig’s new version of Aeschylus’ *Suppliant Women* responds to three anxieties that have filled politics of the 2010s: the European migrant crisis, the vigorous discourse around the mechanisms of democracy, and the most recent wave of testimony from women detailing widespread, historic, and everyday harassment by men. Both Greig and Ramin Gray, the director of the production this text was written specifically for, were adamant that they had not gone out of their way to make Aeschylus’ play ‘relevant’ with respect to these issues. “There will be people who say, ‘Well they’ve made this all about asylum seekers, and that line about

Syria has obviously been placed' and the frustrating thing is that all that stuff is already there – it isn't imposed by us" (Brooks 2016). And it is indeed remarkable, even to scholars and fans of Greek tragedy, how easily Aeschylus' play seems to speak to us moderns. The significant damage to the surviving Greek text in the latter part of the play has been smoothed over by Greig (or, perhaps, by Professor Isabel Ruffell of the University of Glasgow, who provided Greig with a 'literal' to work from). But aside from that, Greig has not had to wrestle with the play or its pacing of events in order to make it legible, and exciting, for modern audiences.

He has, however, produced a text and tone that balances ancient and modern beautifully. This is poetry that allows the play its energy and poignancy, elevated from the speech of everyday but still direct and powerful. The rhythm of the spoken parts leaps off the page, often (to my ear) echoing a resolved Greek iambic trimeter with their series of short syllables in triplet rhythm.

Daughters, we've landed, be watchful now – listen
To your careful old captain, Danaos, your father.
We crossed the sea safely with planning and thinking
But we're not safe yet - we need land sense now. (15-6)

Occasional internal rhymes, too, support the driving energy in the choral speech. The women explain who their pursuers are: "Our cousin men, four dozen men" (11). The elevated rhythms of the text are complemented by Greig's invention of new vocabulary and compounds, as Aeschylus did. The suppliant women share their "clan gods" (13) with the Argives. Hera's wrath is "wife anger" (15). The suppliants themselves are "girl-flesh" (12) and "girl-meat" (35). The vessel carrying the sons of Aegyptus, a "crime-ship." It is hard not to compare this approach with that of the famous translator of Aeschylus into verse, Tony Harrison, who likewise created his own lexicon in translating the Aeschylean language of the *Oresteia* (see Taplin 241-42). But Greig comes off no worse for the comparison.

High emotion is expressed in more visceral and bald language. Faced with their Egyptian cousins the chorus call them "Maggoty-meat men/ Rats-in-a-drain men" (40). The King accuses the Egyptian herald, "You talk of gods but shit in temples" (41). Even when this kind of language edges towards the bathetic, there is an authenticity in the desperation of such language. The Chorus' threat, "we will fight you, men of shit" (37) and their description of their cousins' "crap ship" (38) underscores the emptiness of their threats, their fear and vulnerability. Is there a knowing wink towards Housman in Greig's overwrought description of a "flax-stitched, oar-powered, tent-palace on sea" (14)? His control of a poetic and blunt verse elsewhere makes me think so.

However, the way contemporary politics is mobilised by language and production choices, and the promotional materials that supported the tour, is potentially more unsettling. For all the protestations in interviews, deliberate moves have been made to foreground the modern migrant crisis in Europe in the 2010s. The cover of the text shows an image of women in headscarves, packed tightly into a precariously balanced dinghy. Certain phrases cohere with the Greek but are also resonant of political discourse of far-right European movements, such as the King's

use of the phrase “letting in migrants” (23). With greater resonance globally, the King’s complaint “But this war’s not mine, it’s washed up on my shores” (22), only too readily summons up images of the drowned attempting to reach safety. Contemporary discourse about the system of democracy, too, has been summoned in the language. In his introductory essay, Gray notes the difference between “the current crisis of faith in our democratic institutions, in elections and referenda in particular” and the Aeschylean play where we first find the word ‘democracy’ and where its workings are devoid (apparently) of modern disillusionment. And it is here that we can see a few tweaks to Aeschylus’ Greek to give voting an extra prominence in Greig’s version. For example, where the King states he wishes to share (in Greek, κοινώω) the Suppliants’ request with the citizens, Greig has “So there must be a vote – a vote by the citizens” (22). For Gray and Greig, “revisiting the moment when these ideas were conceived” is a way to remind ourselves of democracy’s good, and to cleanse ourselves of cynicism. It seems of less importance that what we are presented with in *Suppliant Women* is a rather thin version of democracy. “The Greeks were unanimous! All in favour!” (31). Democracy, then, is all well and good as long as “the will of the people” (32) is unanimous and undivided.

Around the time of this play’s first production in the autumn of 2016, the #metoo movement was making headlines, in the wake of the damning allegations made against now-convicted rapist Harvey Weinstein. All of which made, and makes, a fairly overwhelming frame for the play that explicitly focuses on a large group of women, wonderfully visible and voluble in performance, fleeing sexual violence. It is entirely unsurprising that the play’s closing rallying cry of “Give equal power to women” (47), a phrase rendered word-for-word from the Greek, prompted audiences to give the performers a standing ovation both times I saw the production (once in Edinburgh, once in London). The apparent space given to retelling trauma of such sexual harassment was a selling point for the production and undoubtedly helped its considerable box office success. But there is something unsettling, then, about the careful adherence to the ambiguity in what Zeus does to impregnate Io in Greig’s text, while tapping into (and benefiting from) a much broader contemporary political moment that seeks to condemn all harassment of women. It certainly does not help that Zeus’ guilt is acknowledged in rather queasy terms by Gray in his “Director’s Note” in the same edition, when he chooses to explain how “her charms attracted the lustful Zeus” and “Zeus’ chaotic randiness is tempered by his other functions” (2017, n.p.). The emergence during the production’s run in London in 2017 of allegations of harassment from eight women against the play’s director provided a further grim frame for the production.

Where Greig’s *Suppliant Women* invokes global politics, the *Bakkhai* of poet and Professor of Classics, Anne Carson, aims at an ostensibly ahistorical discussion of what it is to be alive and human. The title of her translator’s note, written in verse, “i wish i were two dogs then i could play with me,” is indicative of the self-reflective journey she wishes to take her readers on. Delphi may have warned, ‘Know yourself,’ but the tragedy Carson puts before us presents our utter inability to achieve that self-knowledge.

One of the most stunning achievements in this translation is in Carson's ability to give space for, and indeed elicit, the individual sense of exhilaration one might feel as part of a Dionysiac chorus. Carson's parodos renders Euripides' opening stately ionics thus:

From Asia I come,
from Tmolos I hasten,
to this work that I love,
to this love that I live
calling out
Bakkhos!
Who is in the road?
Who is in the way?
 Stay back,
 stand quiet.
 I shall sing Dionysos –
 I shall make the simplest sentence explode with his name! (19)

The elegant simplicity of “this work that I love, / to this love that I live” utterly captures the essential and unfussy credo given by this Dionysiac chorus. The disarming sincerity of wishing for a ‘simple’ sentence to ‘explode,’ signals all too presciently the violence buried in their matter-of-fact zealotry.

It is no surprise that a poet like Carson can make translating this play seem easy. At no point do we feel any strain or tension between language and thought. Tiresias' explanation of how Dionysus' birth story came to be because of a confusion around the homonymic ὄμηρος (*homeros*, ‘hostage’) and ὀμηρός (*ho meros*, ‘thigh’) is transformed easily into a comparable homonymic confusion between Zeus' ‘guilt’ in the face of Hera's wrath and the ‘gilt’ pins that he used to contain Dionysus in his thigh (27). The text is so comfortable with itself that it traverses from the highly poetic to the quotidian with ease – Pentheus dismisses his grandfather's attempts at Bacchic attire, scoffing “you look like a lampshade” (26). A typical Carson deadpan tone at precise moments of acute tragedy suits Euripides' chilling presentation of the god. From the slightly teasing: “Might be a good idea, if it's not too much bother, / to show more respect / for your old grandfather. / Not to mention the gods” (26), to their final, crushing, “That's how this went / today” (85), their cruel detachment echoing the cool justice of Dionysus.

Carson adds a quite literal freshness to this play in her examination of ‘greenness’ as colour and thematic concept that is essential to Dionysiac cult, imagery, and its deeper significance. The ethics of “green” are “fantastically selfish” (8), a statement that links early shoots, beginnings, the desire for life, and the will of Dionysus together. Carson expands on brief references in Euripides' text to augment this examination, conjuring in the parodos a litany of ‘greens’ – “ivy green, / olive green, / fennel green, /... green of bottles, ferns and apples, / green of dawn-soaked dew and slender green of roots” (20-21), adding to, and enhancing this subtle theme in Euripides' play.

A poet for whom a text's layout is as important as the words themselves, Carson deploys the mechanism with aplomb. The immense satisfaction in

prevailing against one's enemies is evoked by her use of space in the third choral ode:

What feels better
than to hold your hand over the head of your enemy?
Who
does
not
love
this
feeling?
(57)

Many of us may feel conflicted in the feeling, but Carson invites us to lean in and luxuriate. Just as delightful is to find the wildness of the dochmiac metre, unleashed mischievously in the fourth ode, its surprising slant-wise energy summoned in the placement of an exclamation mark on a line all of its own. And with all of this play and poetry, Carson triumphs in the clarity of the story telling and taking time to explain Greek concepts (such as the *daimon*) in ways that we moderns can understand. Carson's translation makes no claim to be breaking any moulds or to be speaking directly to contemporary politics. Nor does she attempt to hide herself and her biases (biases which other scholars have noted with a vital acuity)¹ as a translator. But the text stands solid and often brilliant.

Rachel Hadas's choice to produce a volume with the two Iphigenia plays is a thoroughly satisfying one. There is something rather cathartic in seeing a young woman sacrificed by her own father in *Iphigenia at Aulis* reappear in the *Iphigenia among the Taurians*, filled with confidence and vigour, enacting (how unwillingly, we can't be sure) a bloody vengeance on the Greek men straying to Tauris' shores. In addition to providing a thoughtful general frame for why we want to keep reading tragedy today, already mentioned above, Hadas shows a real appreciation for the characters she finds in the two plays as figures we might recognise today. "Euripides' characters, I saw again and again, are not only beautifully observed themselves; they are also possessed of remarkable insights into human behaviour" (xiv). The modern world and the political upheavals in the USA in 2016, made their mark on Hadas and her students, and subsequently her translations: "my students were mesmerized by the darkly compelling, ironic, and ambiguous story about the ambitious, ruthless father and the nubile daughter, the family whose struggle loomed larger than life" (xviii). And while I failed to follow any further resonances in the play with Donald Trump and his daughter Ivanka (perhaps as I am located outside of the US), we do find, particularly in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, moments where Hadas's language strikes the ear as particularly contemporary. Menelaus speaks of Agamemnon's "classified information" (16). He also criticises his brother for his politicking to gain assent for his command of the Trojan exhibition:

You were available to everyone –
hearty handshakes left and right,
office door never shut;
interviews granted whether people asked for them or not.
You were looking to be visible,
raise your profile, go up in every poll. (17)

We shouldn't be surprised when we see how close a translation this is from the Greek; there are some means of acquiring power that are evergreen.

Hadas excels in translating choral odes in ways that will make sense to students and non-academic readers alike. To do this she (quite rightly) moves away from the syntax and word order of the Greek, taking a more front-footed and creative role in rendering the verse, yet summoning emotions and meaning that do justice to cultural specifics of the ancient Greek world. The chorus of the *Iphigenia among the Taurians* often recall their past and hoped-for experiences of taking part in their community's choral dances. Here Hadas gently shifts us as readers to a less culturally specific space. Where Euripides' chorus call to mind in the second stasimon their traditional, quasi-competitive participation in the choruses that would be performed at weddings, Hadas has the women in the final antistrophe hope, "Of all the girls in my generation,/ would I be the lucky one/ to drape myself in luxury/.../ was this a contest I could win?" (130). The details of the ancient Greek marriage rituals and community participation are simultaneously softened but maintained in this poignant verse.

Not all of the choices made to bring the ancient mythical world closer to our own strike quite the right note. A livid Menelaus barks at one point, "Damn straight I've read it" (16), a colloquialism that sits awkwardly with the use of "tablet" (whether she means an antiquated wax tablet, or extremely modern electronic tablet –neither seems quite to work). Similarly, at the crucial moment when Iphigenia unwittingly reveals who she is, she objects to Pylades' interjection of surprise with "Why do you call on God's name? I'm not done" (111). These occasional jolting moments are not numerous but brought this reader down to earth with a bit of a bump. In her introduction, Hadas speaks of honouring the paradox of Euripides' style where "the unbuttoned, often distinctly unheroic tenor of the personalities and action...manages to coexist with language that is often chiselled, poised, and beautiful" (xx). And in the main the balance is maintained.

Hadas has made a stronger choice, however, in her use of verse and rhyme. As a poet in her own right there is no doubting her command of metre, rhyme, off-rhyme and rhythm. It is also true that rhyming verse translations are not generally popular, seen as too stylised for modern ears. What I found continuously discomfiting and, ultimately, quite distracting was the general but not total use of strong end-rhyming lines throughout both plays. To my ears too many of these felt forced. Certain words were repeatedly and noticeably rhymed with same or similar words. In both plays 'daughter,' 'slaughter,' 'altar,' 'water' ended lines in various combinations,² and while these words are certainly programmatic for both plays, by the end the repetition felt tired rather than powerful. Or the final choral lines from *Iphigenia in Aulis*: "Son of Atreus, depart with joy/ and then return with joy/ once you have taken Troy" (74). Repeated use of words like 'you', 'too', 'to' etc to enable line-end rhyming likewise made the scheme seem a bit arbitrary. This was particularly acute in a speech of Pylades:

So tell me who,
when I'm in Argos, I should hand this to –

and tell me too
exactly what I should report from you. (111)

Of the three publications, Hadas's are the most recognisable as translations one might use in a classroom, even though both Carson and Hadas can draw on their pedagogical experience in this. Where Hadas speaks eloquently and sincerely about what Euripides is and does, Carson's *Bakkhai* is very much her own and is beautiful to read as a brand-new work. She offers readers a different way of thinking about the play (and, perhaps, themselves). Greig's translation, meanwhile, is very attractive, particularly at first glance, and is filled with hooks aplenty for students and readers wondering what Greek tragedy *really* has to offer the modern world. Readers will also be able to unpick and discuss with others the dissonant notes in its politics of sex and democracy, left mostly unexplored in the production. It is a translation that should be handled carefully and critically, for all its appeal.

¹ See Gabriel 2018.

² For example: "altar ... slaughter" (18), "slaughter ... daughter" (26), "altar ... daughter" (33), "daughter ... slaughter" (63), "daughter ... altar" (92), "altar ... slaughter" (129).

Works Cited

- Brooks, Libby. "This play is primal": David Greig on an ancient drama more relevant than ever," *The Guardian*, 6 September 2016. Online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/sep/06/david-greig-lyceum-theatre-aeschylus-the-suppliant-women> (Accessed 1/11/19).
- Gabriel, Kay. "Specters of Dying Empire: The Case of Carson's *Bakkhai*." *TRIPWIRE: A Journal of Poetics*, 14 (2018): 321-29.
- Taplin, Oliver. "The Harrison Version: 'So long ago that it's become a song?'" in *Agamemnon in Performance*. Ed. Fiona Macintosh et al., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015: 241-42.