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**EMERGENT TRENDS OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMATIC
RECONTEXTUALIZATION: AN EXPLORATION UTILIZING
EUGENE O'NEILL'S *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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ABSTRACT

EMERGENT TRENDS OF CONTEMPORARY DRAMATIC RECONTEXTUALIZATION:
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Major Director: Dr. Keith Byron Kirk, Assistant Professor, Department of Theatre

The art of adaptation in the realm of drama has undergone an easily recognizable evolution in the past couple of decades, from the work of Sarah Ruhl to Branden Jacobs-Jenkins. This evolution has opened doors to an altogether new form of adaptation in the theatre: dramatic recontextualization. While the two forms are built upon a foundation of shared aspects, there are certain observable and quantifiable delineations between the two artistic forms. As this trend continues to grow exponentially in the world of theatre, it is important to further research the origins and methodologies of contemporary dramatic recontextualization, both to provide a better understanding of what drives the form and better educate current writers. This thesis project identifies Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (adapted itself from Aeschylus' *Oresteia*) as one of the earliest American examples of dramatic recontextualization, and then proceeds to analyze O'Neill's script both as its own individual work of early dramatic recontextualization and in comparison to Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *An Octoroon*, which I consider the benchmark for contemporary dramatic recontextualization. Finally, after identifying

the components that easily identify a work of theatre as dramatic recontextualization through multiple lenses (historical, textual, performance, cultural), I provide an excerpt of my work on my own recontextualization of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, setting it after the United States' exit of Afghanistan in 2022 and experimentally layering recontextualization upon recontextualization. The result of this thesis project is a detailed examination of O'Neill, Jacobs-Jenkins, Theatre History, and Recontextualization, which provide a framework for future standardization of the recontextualization process, as well as the research required of the writer for such an effort.

VITA

Cameron Michael Nickel was born on May 7, 1998, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and is an American citizen. He graduated from Bethel Park High School, Bethel Park, Pennsylvania in 2016. He received both his Bachelor of Arts in Theatre Performance and Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from Seton Hill University, Greensburg, Pennsylvania in 2020 and subsequently enrolled in graduate studies within the next year. He received a Master of Fine Arts in Theatre Performance and Pedagogy from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2023. As an artist, Cameron works as an actor, writer, director, and educator primarily in the Pittsburgh area, and his research focuses on dramatic literature, intertextuality, and healthy acting technique.

INTRODUCTION

Eugene O'Neill is often credited as being the father of modern American drama, and his extensive repertoire of award-winning plays serve as testament to that moniker. Most of his work was considered revolutionary during the period of time that it was written and produced, whether it be due to O'Neill's central focuses on theatrical realism, epic dramatic style, or even his focus on the then-fringe groups of American society. Plays such as *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *The Iceman Cometh* delve deep into his own family trauma and sense of exclusion. Some of his other work, though, notably drew from an entirely removed interest of O'Neill's: ancient Greek drama. In and prior to O'Neill's time, the art of adaptation in the United States was not dissimilar to the art of translation; the works of Shakespeare were often adapted into operas, and the poetry of the Bard literally translated into the music of the composer. This notion of a translation-adaptation can further be applied to the works of Moliere and Strindberg that would make their way to the United States with the rise of farce and realism, respectively. O'Neill, too, saw value in this blending of literary forms, and crafted his own epic adaptation drawing on the Greek playwright Aeschylus's *The Oresteia*, which consisted itself of a trilogy of plays called *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* consisted similarly of a trilogy of plays (*Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, and *The Haunted*), but sets the action during the events surrounding the conclusion of the American Civil War. Notably, O'Neill's epic work of drama is often not listed among the existing adaptations of the ancient Greek story, likely due to O'Neill's fairly revolutionary modernization of the time and place, hence making the epic an almost entirely different beast in and of itself. While this phenomenon can at first glance be viewed as a slight towards O'Neill's work, I believe it is

rather a testament to it, as well as the birth of an entirely different type of dramatic adaptation: Recontextualization.

Though nearly all of human history (and more specifically art, theatre, and media history) can be viewed and analyzed through the lens of and as a repeated cycle of recontextualization, I firmly believe that O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* constitutes the first major step away from traditional adaptation and towards dramatic recontextualization that such contemporary American playwrights as Branden Jacob Jenkins, Suzan Lori Parks, and many others specialize in today. This new contemporized form of dramatic adaptation consists largely of a re-evaluation of older landmark dramatic material into something more meaningful and significant to today's political, historical, and cultural climates. Note, though, that the process of traditional adaptation and translation is yet well and alive today, and there are plenty examples that can be found within the contemporary dramatic canon (see Conor McPherson's recent adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*, which breathes new, spirited, streamlined life into Chekhov's classic play without making the major changes that some of the aforementioned writers delight in making). At some point, these two forms diverged and traveled separate paths, and the revolutionary work of Eugene O'Neill very likely placed the metaphorical fork in the road. This new form of contemporary recontextualization that began with O'Neill thus stems (or, rather, stemmed) from an American nation in times of extreme racial, cultural, and political revolution, and continues to thrive off of these phenomena to this day.

Historically, O'Neill's trilogy had its premiere in October of 1931, just following the advent of the Great Depression in the United States, and on the tails of a period of hedonism and splendor that itself followed upon the heels of World War I. Additionally, immigration patterns following World War I began to fizzle out as the United States government began placing focus

on who to allow into the country as opposed to who to dis-allow, something not necessarily seen to this level since post-Civil War era America. This is historically significant, as O'Neill's plays often deal with themes of alienation, religion, family trauma, and the American psyche. Specifically, *Mourning Becomes Electra* applies O'Neill's staple themes and tone to the epic storytelling and mythos of ancient Greek drama, and vice versa. *Mourning Becomes Electra* being set just following the final days of the American Civil War is no coincidence on O'Neill's part, as this post-war re-ordering of society was present not only in his own life following World War I, but also in Aeschylus's *Oresteia* narrative following the Trojan War. This triply-layered historical lens is only one of the many that O'Neill employs, though, as he further recontextualizes the relationships, stigma, and culture of each of these specific historical elements. By blending adaptation and his own epic storytelling to transfigure what is widely considered Aeschylus's masterpiece into his very own masterpiece, O'Neill was able imbue his usual themes and tonality in a wholly new form of drama.

And, just as Eugene O'Neill endeavored to make new and significant the work of a long gone Greek dramatist, I, through my work and research on this thesis, will endeavor to bring O'Neill's epic tale into the twenty-first century. This will be no simple feat of adaptation, though, as I believe a recontextualization such as *Mourning Becomes Electra* requires a further layering of recontextualization to transform O'Neill's themes into work that holds more tangible immediacy to the cultural, historical, and political revolutions that the world, and more specifically North America, are experiencing today. As will be discussed in later chapters, my take on the play will utilize similar methodologies that O'Neill used to construct his trilogy, and will further endeavor to transliterate one dramatic medium (the three play, nine act marathon

structure of *Mourning Becomes Electra*) into another, more contemporary medium (the two act play structure seen all across the United States today).

To accomplish this experimental layering of dramatic recontextualization and adaptation, the following chapters will discuss the life and work of Eugene O'Neill and what scholars today recognize as O'Neill theory, an in-depth comparison of period and historical information pertinent to both *Mourning Becomes Electra* and my newly constructed recontextualization set right after the United States' exit from the war in Afghanistan (as well as brief examinations of post-Trojan War and World War I society as they were pertinent to both Aeschylus and Eugene O'Neill in their initial draftings of their respective plays), an analysis and unpacking of O'Neill's plays themselves, and a brief discussion of the evolution of dramatic adaptation over the last one hundred years or so and the cultural shifts that we can trace these trends to. Also present within the thesis text will be additional analysis and exploration of the contemporary concept of recontextualization as I see it today, with special emphasis placed on the work of Branden Jacob Jenkins (especially in his recent recontextualization of Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon*, *An Octoroon*). Finally, the latter sections of the thesis will consist of an excerpt of my final product alongside additional comments and annotations regarding the changes and similarities between it and O'Neill's original plays (for example, the viability of the Freudian psychology O'Neill utilized in contemporary science and drama). This information is necessary to the evolutionary history of playmaking, as well as presenting new topics for further research to the realm of theatre and media history as a whole. This thesis's ultimate purpose is to examine the art and process trends of adaptation and recontextualization through the lens of O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and its original source text, and then to apply the same concepts to my own experimental work, layering adaptation upon adaptation.

Before embarking upon the journey of this thesis, though, I believe it necessary to briefly discuss and elaborate on my views as they relate to adaptation and recontextualization. Though later chapters will include more information on the comparison, I would like to state up front my hypothesis: In the last one hundred or so years (and especially within the last quarter of the century), dramatic adaption in the theatre, among other mediums, has undergone such a radical evolution in both process and product such that it no longer resembles the time-honored art of adaptation that we know of; it is something entirely new and fresh that I, throughout this thesis, refer to as recontextualization. Recontextualization is not a new concept and has, in fact, been the subject of many years of scholarship, but we in the arts have, for one reason or another, continued to refer to vastly differing forms of dramatic or literary iteration under the same umbrella: adaptation. This terminology, I believe, no longer serves what has become in itself a vibrant, specialized, and rapidly evolving art form, and hence a delineation should be made between the two forms. If this notion is difficult to grasp, I have found it easier to think of under the related term neo-adaptation; it is certainly still a form rooted in adaptation, but has over time become something so much more. Later in this thesis, and as previously alluded to in this very introduction, I will further examine this delineation through a comparison of Conor McPherson's adaptation of *Uncle Vanya* and Branden Jacob Jenkins' *An Octoroon*. This information is stated here as it is both a vital theme and a recurring set of terminology throughout the following text.

In regards to the research and drafting methodology of this thesis project, I have provided the outline for workflow in the following paragraph. This description also serves as my noting the inspiration for and interest in the project subject as a whole. The project's impetus can be traced back to my initial discovery of O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* during my studies at Seton Hill University in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, where I completed my undergraduate studies

in the spring of 2020. Specifically, I was drawn to a monologue suggestion from a faculty member; the section of *The Hunted* where Orin recounts his murdering of other men during his time in American Civil War, and how the faces return to him nightly and, eventually, appear as his own. While at the time I was fascinated with the trilogy on the surface level (that is, as additional material to mine and add to my library of actor's monologues), I soon became enthralled with O'Neill's layering of post-Civil War America over top of post-Trojan War Greece. By this time, I had performed ancient Greek tragedy as Jason in a department production of *Medea*, as well as a department re-imagining of Sheridan's *The Rivals* as Faulkland. Both of these projects heightened the already archaic text in a number of ways, and were in and of themselves small-scale recontextualizations of the source material. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the exemplification of this form of adaptation, and so I was naturally drawn to eventually revisit the piece in my own work. During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, I set to work adapting another play in my own style: Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (which I titled *Absolute Chavs*). This iteration of the play expanded my understanding and formulation of recontextualization theory in the theatre, as I chose to primarily write a translation-adaptation of the source text with the addition of some more contemporary verbiage and situational comedy. This undertaking resulted in a re-evaluation of my other previous work, primarily a play cycle that I began crafting as part of my capstone project in my final year at Seton Hill University; a cycle of plays taking the rough plot structure and tonality of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and mish-mashing it with the ideology behind Sartre's *No Exit* that I then set in the present day and focused on the widespread school shooting problem that pervades American society. I had already taken a stab at large-scale recontextualization with that project,

and I felt there was further potential to formulate my views on and style of recontextualization through *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

As with my previous attempts at dramatic recontextualization, my methodology for this project, and for *Mourning Becomes Electra* followed a similar iteration of what I had done before. Being that *Mourning Becomes Electra* is such a behemoth of a play, it was important to me to first identify what exactly O'Neill was writing about when he first penned it. This involved an examination of his life and the surrounding circumstances that birthed this particular play. Along with that, the sequencing of this particular play within O'Neill's canon was especially of interest, and getting an idea of what came before and after in his canon would be very important to my understanding of his point of view. *The Oresteia*, in addition, would need to be studied thoroughly for necessary context and tracking of how O'Neill mirrored the plot of Aeschylus's trilogy. After being equipped with that knowledge, I could put pen to paper (or, as is often the case today, finger to keyboard) and decide what was important to my piece in comparison with O'Neill's. I decided that I would complete the beginnings of my play, and then begin to complete additional research both on O'Neill and other subjects while simultaneously finishing both my drafts of the play this thesis; I thought this would be the best option to marry the individual disciplines and create some sort of harmony between them. Upon completing research and the first draft of my play, I would be free to review all of the information in front of me and simultaneously revise both documents accordingly. This methodology is not without flaw, though, as it would become increasingly evident that my research would continually steer my point of view in different directions until I could finalize the rough outline of events my play would cover. The section of this thesis dedicated to the playwright's homework is intended to and will speak more to this particular topic.

In the process of crafting the narrative of this thesis project, and despite extreme attention being paid to every possible pertinent research aspect and rabbit-hole even tangentially related to the subject matter, it is a sure reality that there is much scholarship that will be glazed over in the process. To do these topics their rightful justice, the remaining text of this introduction will, for the reader's consideration, address some related research that I found useful for further reading and inspiration, but could not place logically within the subsequent chapters. For example, psychology (in particular, Freudian psychology) was one of O'Neill's most important facets of theme when crafting *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but I do not speak at length about all that Freud covers; O'Neill was primarily interested in the psyche and Oedipal/Electra complexes, which I do cover in the section regarding extended analysis of the original plays. Freud, though, developed many concepts that are not explicitly mentioned by O'Neill as influences on *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but were surely evident in the creation and presentation of the work. Freud's views on war, for example, are of special importance to this play and process, as both O'Neill's characters and my own iterations of them are plagued by the horrors and effects of the American Civil War. The effect on the psyche cannot be understated, and I thoroughly wish I could have included more on the subject in the text of this thesis. Freud's theories on truth, humanity, and dreams further appear evidently within the pages of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but relate only tangentially to O'Neill's obsession with Orin's Oedipus complex, Lavinia's Electra complex, and his focus on the American psyche in post-war times of change and revolution. All of these theories can easily be applied to the world in which O'Neill lived post-World War I, as well as the world that we live in today. The effects of war on the psyche and post-war societies will be touched on in later chapters, but more extensive reading and research could surely be done on those subjects in the context of this thesis project.

Another tangential subject that receives appropriate attention within the latter parts of this thesis, but that I believe could easily be the impetus for an entirely separate project of this scale, is the evolution of media and what I call in later chapters the cycle of material. As I stated in the first couple paragraphs of this introduction, nearly all of human history can very easily be viewed through a lens of recycled stories, actions, media, intentions; the list could go on and on for pages. In a day and age where the economized public sphere is complaining of nothing genuinely new being produced, there is constantly a push to adapt material into other mediums and formats as though the original format was insufficient. On Broadway in recent years, *SpongeBob SquarePants*, *Beetlejuice*, *MJ the Musical*, *TINA – The Tina Turner Musical*, and others have all received extended runs of productions, while innovative new musicals have struggled to find an audience or sufficient funding to be adequately produced. Marvel, similarly, has created an entirely new market out of the adaptation of their comic book characters into the mediums of film and TV, albeit to varying success depending on the project in question. Whether these iterations add anything at all to the art form (see Scorsese’s controversial comments on Marvel and the superhero genre as a whole) or build further upon our great history of storytelling is exactly the issue being grappled with in the world today; if it’s not new, is it worthwhile? This concept would have been exciting to explore specifically in my own work and the work of Eugene O’Neill and other dramatists, but unfortunately doesn’t quite fit into the spirit of this particular thesis; I do hope to write further about it in the future, though. But for now, I am content with taking my place in that cycle of material, and simply take joy in grappling with and exploring what recontextualization means in the context of Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra* and what it meant for Eugene O’Neill to adapt *The Oresteia* in such a way; that is what the heart of this thesis is.

CHAPTER 1: O'NEILL BACKGROUND

In order to best attack an overarching analysis of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, I believe it is important to have at least a fundamental understanding of both the writer himself and events surrounding the creation of the first and final drafts of the play. In the following chapter, I will attempt to synthesize a brief biographical survey of Eugene O'Neill (as well as his family) and then provide a more detailed analysis of what has come to be regarded as O'Neill Theory. This analysis, of course, will be centered around the events and details of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but will also include excerpts and examples from O'Neill's larger breadth of work.

EUGENE O'NEILL: A SNIPPET OF HIS LIFE

In his play *The Great God Brown*, O'Neill writes that "Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue!"¹ and this would no doubt be true of his own life. Eugene O'Neill was born October 16, 1888 in the Barrett House Hotel of New York City to Irish immigrants James O'Neill and Mary Ellen Quinlan. The last of three sons (one of which perished due to an encounter with the measles; an event that would haunt his mother for the rest of her days), Eugene entered the world at a point where his father was consistently away and his mother was struggling deeply with a morphine addiction that would shape portrayals of her in O'Neill's later plays. His elder brother James Jr. would come to be just as estranged as Eugene from their mother, though, as she primarily blamed him for transmitting the measles to Edmund, the second son that died in infancy while Mary Ellen was away in New York. Eugene spent most of his childhood summers with his family at their cottage in New London, Connecticut, where he would later envision a happier, more whimsical childhood in his nostalgic play *Ah,*

¹ Tucker et al., *Twenty-Five Modern Plays*.

Wilderness!. His father, James O’Neill Sr., was a notable actor in the touring production of Dumas’ *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and was away on tour for a good portion of Eugene’s life. When the family was together in New London, though, they attended church service every Sunday and Eugene attended Betts Academy in nearby Stamford for his primary schooling. Eventually, an adolescent Eugene would reject his belief in religion (specifically, Catholicism), and seek a more secular form of education. Eugene later attended Princeton for a single year in 1906, but would again reject this educational experience and seek the education of a life lived on the sea.

For six years, O’Neill worked and lived according to the whim of the sea, an experience that, though at the time took immense toll on his physical and mental health, built further upon and justified his love for the water—whether it be the Thames in New London or the waters of Cape Cod. During his six years of travel via the sea, Eugene lived in Buenos Aires, Liverpool, and eventually wound up resettled in New York City. By the point he had returned to the United States, though, he had developed a drinking problem, and in a room above a bar that would later be his inspiration for the locale of *The Iceman Cometh*, attempted suicide by mixing pills and alcohol. Eugene, of course, survived this initial attempt at taking his life, but soon faced more strife as he later came down with tuberculosis, leaving him trapped in a Connecticut sanitarium for nearly six months during the years of 1912 and 1913. It was here, in the Gaylord Farm Sanitarium, though, that Eugene O’Neill would finally begin his fated career as a playwright.²

While O’Neill would begin crafting plays during his time at Gaylord Farm Sanitarium, his first big success would not materialize until the premiere of *Bound East for Cardiff* in 1916, which was produced by what would eventually become the Provincetown Players in

² “Eugene O’Neill | Biography, Plays, & Facts | Britannica.”

Massachusetts. Prior to this initial success, though, O'Neill was lucky enough to attend approximately one year of playwriting classes at Harvard University under the direction of George Pierce Baker, where Eugene learned how to structure his stories and refine his authorial voice. Though he only attended for a year, Baker's class set him on a path towards his first commercial successes in *Bound East for Cardiff* and, not long after, his first play on Broadway: *Beyond the Horizon*. His first full-length play, *Beyond the Horizon* would prove an extremely strong first outing for a young Eugene, netting him the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1920. From that point forward, his commercial career would only skyrocket, and his personal life become more complex.

While 1920 certainly was a monumental year for Eugene (re: winning his first Pulitzer Prize for Drama), it also proved to complicate his family life. On August 10, 1920, his father, James O'Neill Sr., passed away from intestinal cancer. His fight with the disease kept Eugene traveling back and forth from his father's hospital bed during the staging and production of *Beyond the Horizon*, during which Eugene would recount to a friend that "it was the greatest satisfaction [my father] knew that I had made good in a way dear to his heart. And I thank 'whatever Gods may be' that *Beyond* came into its own when it did and not too late for him."³ Though Eugene at one point of his earlier life rather disliked his father, his successful involvement in James Sr.'s craft eventually elicited a sense of respect and kinship between the two for the brief amount of time that James Sr. had left. He finally passed in August of 1920. Eugene's mother Mary Ellen, whose spirit would go on to have such prevalence in O'Neill's later plays like *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, passed not long after of a brain tumor in 1922.

³ Sheaffer, *O'Neill, Son and Artist.*, 17.

Finally, Eugene's brother Jamie also perished in the few years following their father's death, drinking himself to death just as Eugene began to see commercial success in New York.

With the death of his brother and parents, Eugene fell back on his own family unit that he had created with his second wife Agnes Boulton. The two married in 1918 and Agnes bore two children while married to O'Neill: Shane in October of 1919, and Oona in May of 1925. O'Neill had previously married Kathleen Jenkins in 1909, who gave birth to his first child, Eugene Jr., in May of 1910, but he became estranged from Kathleen after their divorce in 1912, and would very rarely see Eugene Jr. afterwards. Kathleen was with Eugene during his years of initial success, and lived in New Jersey, Connecticut, and even Bermuda for some time with O'Neill. After the end of his first marriage to Kathleen and the beginning of his second to Agnes, O'Neill continued to live by the water for a great period of time, until he abandoned Agnes to pursue his third and final wife, Carlotta Monterrey. O'Neill would marry Carlotta in 1929, less than a month after his divorce with Agnes became official. Eugene and Carlotta remained together and traveled between France, Georgia, and California until O'Neill's death in 1953. Carlotta eventually posthumously released O'Neill's final works of drama for publication and production against his instruction, the majority of which consisted of what is widely regarded as his masterpiece: the Pulitzer Prize winner *Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

Before that eventuality, though, Eugene would amass two more Pulitzer prizes for his major plays *Anna Christie* and *Strange Interlude*, and would, during an extended stay in France with Carlotta, pen *Mourning Becomes Electra*. For some time before beginning to actually write his trilogy, O'Neill had been stewing about adapting ancient Greek drama for the modern stage. As early as 1926, O'Neill pondered whether it was possible "to get [a] modern psychological approximation of [the] Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of

today, possessed of no belief in gods, or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?.”⁴ By the time he and Carlotta had reached and settled into their villa in the French countryside, O’Neill had already decided on a modernization of Aeschylus’ *The Oresteia* set right up against the conclusion of the American Civil War in what he repeatedly called “Puritan” New England.⁵ This setting appealed to him primarily because it evoked “a place and a climate of morality where frozen silences masked violent passions, where old families decayed behind patrician facades and flagellated themselves with, in the playwright’s words, ‘a Puritan conviction of man born to sin and punishment.’”⁶ In September of 1929, he finally began writing the trilogy, and labored away with it for some months into the next year. While O’Neill was writing, Carlotta ensured that his concentration and focus would never be even remotely disturbed by the goings-on in the villa, to such a degree that even visiting guests and friends would later remark at the absolute feat of organization and dedication she showed to her husband. O’Neill toiled away in his study for many hours at a time, grappling with theatrical concepts and narrative schematics, and, according to Carlotta, could even be heard mumbling in his sleep about the progress of the plays.

Hot off the success of *Strange Interlude* and the failures of *Dynamo*, O’Neill was searching for the perfect form in which to divulge his narrative of family love and hatred. He toyed with direct address, asides, and even full Greek masks as his previous work on the script for *Lazarus Laughed*; he found each of these theatrical devices stale and counter to what he truly wanted to evoke in his new work. O’Neill found early on, and after tossing out the idea of asides similar to those he utilized in *Strange Interlude*, that the device failed to “reveal anything about

⁴ Sheaffer, 336.

⁵ Sheaffer, 337.

⁶ Sheaffer, 337.

the characters” that he could not “bring out naturally in their talk or their soliloquys when alone—[the asides] simply get in the way of the play’s drive.”⁷ Similarly, he found that the tactics he employed in the writing of *Strange Interlude* insufficient when “dealing with simple direct folk or characters of strong will and passion” as it proved “superfluous show-shop ‘business.’”⁸ O’Neill instead decided that the dialogue of this specific work must remain utterly truthful and honest in its meaning and delivery; a sentiment many scholars have remarked upon regarding *Mourning Becomes Electra* since its publication. And while O’Neill did away with most of his previously constructed theatrical devices that made *Strange Interlude* and other plays such a success, the tone and mood of the plays would continue to be affected by the presence they once had held in the narrative, and this is especially evident within the stage descriptions of both the Mannon house and Mannon folk. After departing France for the United States once more, Eugene continued to write, and Carlotta continued to organize his life, until his death in 1953.

O’NEILL THEORY

Eugene O’Neill, throughout his career as a dramatist, covered an abundance of ground and subject matter in his work. The transformation in his work and tone throughout his life absolutely manifests within the writing of his characters, and there are surely traceable threads linking play to play throughout the evolution of his thought processes. These threads run long, and pass through the territories of all facets of life during O’Neill’s tenure. There are, though, certain themes and subjects that O’Neill both was most noted for and paid the closest attention to within his breadth of drama; this section aims to analyze and summarize his main themes,

⁷ Sheaffer, 361.

⁸ Sheaffer, 361.

inspirations, and subjects present within both his major works and, more specifically, *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Very early on, and present within some of his earliest work, O'Neill makes his point of view strikingly apparent; especially when it comes to matters of society and capitalism. While O'Neill would spend his life denying any sort of investment in the realms of realism or social critique,⁹ it is nearly impossible in contemporary studies to separate his deep disdain for the capitalist state from many of his plays, not least *The Hairy Ape*. Being a play chiefly concerned with the horrors and misgivings of widespread commercialized industry in the modern United States, as well as being published in 1922 (notably during the rise of the hedonistic period of disillusionment before the stock market crash that would kickstart the Great Depression less than ten years later), *The Hairy Ape* and its characters act much like a dramatic mouthpiece for O'Neill to divulge his disappointment with the status of American capitalism. "He condemns the capitalist state, but sees no hope for man in any other kind of a state. Whatever hope he sees for man lies in individuals who may have the courage to possess their own souls"¹⁰ theorizes Doris Alexander of New York University, who then further insists that "the best starting point for analysis of O'Neill's social criticism is *The Hairy Ape*, for it gives the main outlines of his social theory as no other play does."¹¹ The character of Yank, though other characters in the play are each individually entrusted with smaller pieces of O'Neill's greater preponderance and damnation of the capitalist state, is the primary vehicle for social commentary here. The genre of the play, as well, is telling of both O'Neill's literary thought process and social criticism; Expressionism as a medium allowed O'Neill to paint a stark, visual picture of the American

⁹ JJI, "Audience Response in the Theater," 329.

¹⁰ Alexander, "Eugene O'Neill as Social Critic," 363.

¹¹ Alexander, 349.

Industrial Revolution as he saw it. O'Neill also, though, and as previously alluded to, offers no real solution to what he believes is the rottenness of the state and its economy—especially through the character of Long, who believes “that he is enslaved by capitalism.”¹² O'Neill clearly despised the entire system of American economics at the time, and, as will prove essential to the understanding of the world he builds in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, further believed that the system encouraged two additional ideologies: that the only answer “‘for every human being’ is death”¹³ and that one of the primary sins of the system is its knack “‘for manufacturing wars.”¹⁴ As was true for his own personal life, the sea and water imagery offered O'Neill great comfort and escape from what he saw as a rotten and crestfallen world. Even in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, “the sea functions as a symbol of the Dionysian desire for freedom from societal constraints, as a timeless place in which are located the Mannon’s ‘blessed isles,’ unreachable utopian realms of a pure, timeless, aboriginal, and achievable love.”¹⁵ The concepts of water imagery and the sea will be further explored and extrapolated on in Chapters two and three, where they are of equal importance to my own iteration on the play.

In terms of O'Neill's musings on the notions of religion and fate, there is a wide selection of material that he left us to efficiently flesh out his theories of both. Religion and Christianity, of course, being such a formative force in both his and his family's personal lives, would no doubt appear in most of his plays. One of the more interesting entries regarding organized religion comes in the form of *Days Without End*, one of O'Neill's more experimental attempts at exploring the duality of man and God. The play, consisting of two characters representing the same man, follows the account of a man teetering on the edge of his own belief in Christianity

¹² Alexander, 351.

¹³ Alexander, 354.

¹⁴ Alexander, 356.

¹⁵ Hunt, “Tragedy's Queer Afterlives,” 145.

and a higher power; the question he faces is whether to submit to or reject God in his own life. Of course, this play, though initially considered a commercial failure, is an extremely personal work for the playwright who struggled with religion since his childhood years in New London. Most O'Neill plays, though often to a less literal degree, concern themselves with the ideas of God and universe as well, partly because the playwright "in every play adopted a mythologic or pseudo-religious symbolism which would give man importance;"¹⁶ this phenomenon can be found in *The Emperor Jones*, *The Hairy Ape*, *Desire Under the Elms*, *The Great God Brown*, and even so far back as *Beyond the Horizon*. It would be especially prevalent, though, within the mythology of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, where he would properly perfect "his notion of fate and human responsibility" in which "the expansive limits of fate and free will" ultimately mold his tragic theory.¹⁷ "Once again the antique yet never old theme of man against the universe holds the stage"¹⁸ one scholar would say of the O'Neill repertoire, an indication that O'Neill thought of God not only as the all-powerful beings found in the Greek, Roman, and even Christian mythologies, but rather the overwhelming force of fate that bears down on so many of his characters and stories; as "for O'Neill, the problem, not the person, is the play."¹⁹ John Loving, while an entrancing and compelling character, is not *Days Without End*, just as Edmund Tyrone is not *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Likewise, the Mannons are not *Mourning Become Electra*, fate and family are. At its total sum, O'Neill's "insight into human nature, dim though it be, is sufficient to indicate that regardless of how influential the forces of the universe are, they

¹⁶ Parks, "Eugene O'Neill's Symbolism," 437.

¹⁷ O'Neill, "The Tragic Theory of Eugene O'Neill," 482.

¹⁸ Parks, "Eugene O'Neill's Symbolism," 445.

¹⁹ Parks, 445.

are not coercive; that man is ultimately responsible for his own destiny.”²⁰ This ideology, of course, is of vital importance to *Mourning Becomes Electra* especially.

Speaking of family life, O’Neill also has thoughts on familial relations, and goes to great lengths to document these beliefs in a great many of his plays. His most famous tragic scenarios (such as those he constructed in *Long Day’s Journey Into Night*, *Desire Under the Elms*, and *Beyond the Horizon*) center their action on often dysfunctional lives of modest American family units; a pattern that can certainly be attributed to his own dysfunctional family history both in his childhood and adult years. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, though this could easily be applicable to his other plays based on family life, the members of the family in question are “masochists and sadists by turns not so much by their own choice but by the overwhelming force of family history that festers within them, preventing their happiness in faraway lands and marking them as queer outsiders in their own town.”²¹ This concept, of course, is closely interlinked with O’Neill’s philosophy of fate we discussed earlier in this chapter, and this is especially true for his later family plays; it is not fate that bears down upon these characters, but the trauma and rotten deeds of their lineage. The same can be said of O’Neill’s philosophy on family in his real life—he had three children from two different marriages, and many of these people close to him he either shut out or was shut out from for a majority of his life. Ever the pessimist (as can be surmised by interpreting his aforementioned philosophies and theories of society and religion, as well as the imminent examination of O’Neill’s deep connection to loneliness), O’Neill’s own family trauma wriggles its way into each of his plays in some respect, and very often even proves to be the primary initiator of his written tragedies.

²⁰ O’Neill, “The Tragic Theory of Eugene O’Neill,” 497.

²¹ Hunt, “Tragedy’s Queer Afterlives,” 138.

Tangentially, O'Neill's great familiarity with and sense of loneliness, likely caused, again, by his own lineage of trauma in his personal life, can be safely considered permeative in every work that he penned, notwithstanding even *Ah, Wilderness!*, one of his few comedies. *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, widely considered the playwright's autobiographical masterpiece, for example, "illustrates that O'Neill was able to portray loneliness in so many aspects perhaps because his own family was so devastated by it."²² And, while the theme of loneliness that can be traced throughout his life's work is undoubtedly related to and perhaps even part of his philosophies on fate and family, there are certain moments within his repertoire that warrant the examination of loneliness as its own separate philosophy where O'Neill is concerned. This pervading theme of loneliness "as a disease of the soul,"²³ as with O'Neill's aforementioned views regarding the inescapable damnation of man in the capitalist system of the American Industrial Revolution, is deeply rooted in his own personal dwellings on what truly comprises human existence. The recurring idea that men should "have the courage to possess their own souls"²⁴ was clearly one that O'Neill would never quite finish until the advent of his later and posthumous plays, but would be of paramount importance to his entire breadth of work; this sense sprouting out from "God, nature, death, and the meaning of life itself" causing "individuals to feel the appalling isolation known as loneliness"²⁵ can be found hanging on his characters throughout *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, and *The Great God Brown*, among many others. More specifically, loneliness (and the pervading dread that travels with it) manifests itself within *Mourning Becomes Electra* in the form of Orin's personal furies:

²² Frazer, *The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama*, 84.

²³ Frazer, 2.

²⁴ Alexander, "Eugene O'Neill as Social Critic," 363.

²⁵ Frazer, *The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama*, 1.

his guilty conscience.²⁶ Surrounding these personal furies that Orin and other members of the Mannon family struggle against throughout the play, though, is the perceived “failure to belong”²⁷ paired with the fatalistic sense that one generation becomes the next rather than simply following the previous; “O’Neill has, therefore, made it the more tragic that either man or Mannon makes his own loneliness in life, when he could so easily belong by loving instead of hating.”²⁸ This same concept easily applies itself to the familial strife within *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* and the personal disillusionment present throughout *The Iceman Cometh*. Even *The Great God Brown* and its use of masking on the human body and soul exemplifies this fatalistic isolation that O’Neill has so perfectly encapsulated. And, though it is one of his few comedies, the sentimental nostalgia of *Ah, Wilderness!* is, in essence, a distortion of this sense of loneliness the playwright does so well; the yearning for something that once was and can never be again is its own form of loneliness—that of the mind and memory. Loneliness and isolation pervade the life and work of Eugene O’Neill, and perhaps can be considered his chief problem that his writing tries to solve to no positive accord.

Understanding these primary concepts that O’Neill explored and wrestled with throughout his career as a playwright (capitalism, religion, fate, family, and loneliness) provide the reader or viewer of his work with the added context and lens through which they can better grapple with and understand their own human condition as O’Neill would see it, and provides an increasingly more important bridge to his work as time passes. In the evolving contemporary world, O’Neill certainly continues to appear timeless, and this is absolutely thanks in part to the universality of the themes he pondered through his plays.

²⁶ O’Neill, “The Tragic Theory of Eugene O’Neill,” 489.

²⁷ Frazer, *The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama*, 83.

²⁸ Frazer, 83.

CHAPTER 2: UNPACKING *MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA*

Now equipped with a greater understanding of O'Neill theory, it is finally possible to view *Mourning Becomes Electra* for its monumental importance in the sequence of the playwright's work. This chapter will focus primarily on taking apart the trilogy of plays and analyzing the work from a scholarly, directorial, dramaturgical, and cultural perspective. To facilitate this, I have included both a complete summary and play analysis of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, as well as paired that information with additional commentary on the significant themes of the play, O'Neill's adaptation methodology, and, finally, a discussion in the following chapter on whether O'Neill was, in his creation of the work, utilizing standard adaptation technique or a heightened technique that can be more accurately associated with the methodology of dramatic recontextualization as I defined it in the introductory pages of this thesis.

SUMMARY

O'Neill's epic is segmented, much like his source material (*The Oresteia*), into three separate plays each dealing with a separate major event. The first play, titled *Homecoming*, is aptly named, as the major event O'Neill centers the play around is the homecoming of the father figure, Brigadier Ezra Mannon, from the newly concluded American Civil War. Before his arrival in Act III, though, the audience is introduced to Christine Mannon (the mother figure) and Lavinia Mannon (the daughter figure). Act I of *Homecoming* begins with Seth, the family gardener, confiding to a newly returned Lavinia some sour information regarding Adam Brant, a man who has recently visited the Mannon house under the guise of courting her. Seth reveals that rumor has circulated that Brant may be a distant, disowned relation of the family whose intentions with Lavinia may not be as they seem. Soon after, Lavinia turns down Peter Niles'

(another suitor) offer of marriage, insisting that her father will require her assistance upon his imminent return. Soon after, Brant himself arrives and Lavinia forces him to reveal the truth about his heritage, proving Seth correct in his assumptions. In Act II, Lavinia reveals to her mother that she had observed her during an adulterous meeting with Brant in New York City. Here, O'Neill unravels the family dynamic of the Mannons, as Christine admits her long-grown hatred of Ezra and, in turn, Lavinia (who dotes incessantly on her father). Christine further reveals her close bond with her son Orin, whom she brought into the world while Ezra was away, thus preventing him from being tainted by any interaction with or memory of her husband. Lavinia, in an effort to protect her father, promises to keep Christine's secret so long as she never sees Brant again, to which Christine begrudgingly agrees. After Lavinia's exit, Christine immediately breaks her promise, and meets with Brant to discuss their intended poisoning of Ezra upon his return as well as their escape to the sea. Ezra finally arrives one week later in Act III, greeted at the front porch by Lavinia and Christine. After sending Lavinia to bed, Ezra confides in Christine that his time at war has made him weary, and that he desires to fix their relationship. Christine assures him that there is no obstacle they cannot surpass, and they both retire to their bedroom. The next morning, Ezra is awakened by Christine leaving their bed, and accuses her of wishing for his death. When Christine reveals her ties to Brant, Ezra begins to have a medical emergency related to his heart, and calls out for his medicine. Christine, though, gives him the poison that Brant procured for her instead, and Ezra calls out to his daughter in his last moments, making known his knowledge of Christine's guilt and actions. Ezra dies, Christine faints, and Lavinia cries.

The middle play of the trilogy, *The Hunted*, is built around the arrival of Orin and his fateful interactions with his sister, mother, and Brant. Upon Orin's arrival at the Mannon House

alongside his friend Peter (who is also courting Lavinia) in Act I of the play, he inquires of Lavinia regarding letters she sent him detailing the sinful deeds of Christine and Brant. Lavinia quickly cautions him not to believe anything their mother says, for she believes Christine will try to manipulate him to exact vengeance on her. Just then, Christine comes out of the house and happily reunites with Orin, who then confronts his mother about the Brant rumors swirling around, and Christine (as Lavinia foresaw) tries to convince Orin that Lavinia has gone mad. Orin, for the time being, submits to Christine and spends some time detailing his dreams of the South Sea Islands during his time at war. For him, these islands represented childhood, innocence, and peace, and were his only solace. Just then, Lavinia calls Orin into the room where Ezra's body is laid out, where Orin turns on Lavinia. Lavinia, fearing she is losing her brother to Christine, insists that if she is able to prove the adulterous behavior between Brant and Christine, that Orin must finally believe her. Orin agrees, and the two resolve to follow Christine to Brant's boat the next time she departs to see him. When the two do follow Christine, they overhear she and Brant discussing their love, their crimes, and their desire to flee to the islands of the Atlantic. Enraged, Orin waits for Brant to be alone, and then draws his pistol and kills him; he and Lavinia make the scene look as though Brant had been robbed before leaving. Upon returning to the Mannon house in Act V, Orin and Lavinia reveal to their mother that they have killed Brant, causing Christine to collapse and sob hopelessly. Orin urges his mother to accompany him to the islands in order to repair their relationship, but Lavinia dismisses Orin, and only mother and daughter are left alone. After a tense exchange of words, Christine enters the house and, using Ezra's pistol, shoots and kills herself as Lavinia is still standing outside.

The conclusion of the trilogy, *The Haunted*, revolves around yet another homecoming: Orin and Lavinia's return from the South Sea Islands a year after the events of *The Hunted*.

While an extended vacation would ordinarily have a healing effect on the vacationers, both Orin and Lavinia look dreadful upon their return; Lavinia has begun to resemble Christine, and Orin has begun to resemble Ezra. And just like their parents, there is a clear wall that has been erected between them over the past year. Orin begins to see that Lavinia has all but taken Christine's place, both in looks and demeanor. Even Peter, upon first glance, mistakes Lavinia for Christine. Lavinia and Peter reunite and discuss their plans for the future, while Orin teases Lavinia for her supposed illicit behavior with the native people of the South Sea Islands during their stay. Lavinia dismisses Orin's words, and Orin retires to his father's study. In Act II, a month has passed, and Lavinia discovers Orin pent up in Ezra's study where he has been, in an effort to right the wrongs of the Mannon kind, constructing a history of the family's crimes and misdeeds. Orin again accuses Lavinia of sleeping with natives during their trip to the islands, and the two bicker and fight like their parents once did; this conflict culminates with Orin grabbing Lavinia by the throat and threatening to kill her. Orin begins to recognize that he has become the father he so despised. In an attempt to keep his work from Lavinia, Orin entrusts the document to Hazel Niles, Peter's sister who is romantically fond of Orin and has been worried about his state of being since he and Lavinia returned. Orin tells Hazel that she cannot open the envelope unless something were to happen to him or Lavinia were to try and marry Peter; he especially urges her to conceal it from Lavinia. Lavinia enters the room, though, and immediately catches on to the scheme. After begging Orin to release the envelope, as well as promising to do whatever he wishes, Lavinia gains access to the envelope. Orin insists that Lavinia never see Peter again, and then confides in her his feelings of romantic love for her. Horrified, Lavinia lashes out and denounces Orin, who then goes into the study and shoots himself as Lavinia is comforted by Peter. Act IV picks up another three days later, with Hazel

trying to keep Lavinia and Peter from marrying; she has shared Orin's envelope with Peter, and hopes it will end their relations. Peter, though, arrives and makes amends with Lavinia; until Lavinia mistakenly calls him by the name Adam. Clearly unable to leave Brant and the Mannon past behind her, she breaks off the engagement to Peter and, to punish herself, retreats into the Mannon house to live in solitude for the rest of her days, even telling Seth to board the windows and let it rot. Thus, O'Neill's play concludes.

ANALYSIS

In order to best analyze the text of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, I decided to utilize the perspective of a director for a production of the play, while also adding a pertinent scholarly lens to the close reading. To accomplish this, I utilize the framework set out in Francis Hodge and Michael McLain's book *Play Directing: Analysis, Communication, and Style*.²⁹ Below is my full analysis, with specific emphasis placed on the Orin and Lavinia archetypes, as they become the focus of my recontextualization:

I. Given Circumstances:

- a. Environment: New England, the United States (probably somewhere relatively near New York City). April 1865 in *Homecoming* and *The Hunted*, and Summer 1866 in *The Haunted*. Most of the action takes place in and just outside of the Mannon House, though some scenes in *The Hunted* drift to a nearby pier. The Mannon home is a statuesque building eerily reminiscent of Greek architecture, and has been in the family for many generations. A driveway leads up to the house from two different entry points of the street. There are six tall Grecian

²⁹ Hodge and McLain, *Play Directing*.

columns built into the front porch. Also present is a large pine tree that starkly contrasts the color of the house, as well as space for lilacs. A bench is also present on the lawn. Inside the house, Ezra Mannon's study and bedroom see significant stage time, as well as the primary sitting room of the home. During *The Hunted*, one scene is set at a nearby wharf in East Boston. The American Civil War has just ended.

- b. Economy: The whole of New England, being part of the Union during the American Civil War, was relatively stable in economic terms near the end of the war. The southern states that were formerly the Confederacy, though, would be much more harshly impacted by the fighting and conclusion of the American Civil War. This was thanks much in part to the strategies employed by the Confederacy during the war, where, due to the significant economic value of slavery and agriculture to these regions, "no capitalistic class was allowed to rise: otherwise the South would have lost the very motive of its fight."³⁰ At this time in history, the entirety of the United States was also largely an agricultural economy, as was evident in a 1961 estimate that "25,226,803 persons lived in the country, as against 6,216,518 in the cities. But in the South the urban population represented only 9.6 percent; in the North, 36 percent."³¹ But, while "the American South was, beyond any reasonable doubt, an agrarian, pre-capitalistic region", the victorious North was very much in the midst of an industrial revolution.³² The Mannons, though, are clearly a wealthy northern family.

³⁰ Luraghi, "The Civil War and the Modernization of American Society," 245.

³¹ Luraghi, 237.

³² Luraghi, 234.

- c. Political: The play is, of course, set during the final days of the American Civil War, during which the political climate of the United States (at the time the Union and the Confederacy) was perhaps at its most tenuous. While O'Neill, for the most part, keeps his distance from the political aspects of the time period, there are certainly a few remarks that provide some insight into the world of the play. Very early on, Seth is heard making racist remarks about some of the African American employees of the Mannon household; he even goes so far to imply that the slaves should never have been emancipated in the first place. Seth also sings and mentions two songs during the course of the play: "Shenandoah" and "John Brown's Body". Both songs were widely sung by both Union and Confederate soldiers during the war, and reference locations such as Missouri, as well as general combat. Furthermore, the notion and motivations of war itself are examined primarily by Ezra and Orin, both of whom served in the Union Army. War changes the both of them, and it is not out of bounds to argue it has disillusioned them as well in different ways. General Robert E. Lee, one of the major Confederate generals, is also mentioned in passing by Ezra.
- d. Social and Religious: Religion and social standing play a large part in the construction and execution of O'Neill's play. The setting of the trilogy, of course, evokes a sense of Puritan New England both in time period and literal location. Not only that, but the time period also denotes the existence of a certain set of social structures present just following the conclusion of the American Civil War; slavery was still very newly ended, and the plantation structure of the wealthy families in the United States was still very much intact. In addition, the Mannons

are a both military and social service family, with Ezra having served as a judge and Brigadier General in the Union Army. For a drama set against Puritan New England, though, O'Neill is rather successful in his efforts to take God and Gods out of the equation. There are only trace mentions of God and religion, and Ezra notably receives his eulogy and burial offstage. Instead of God, though, O'Neill has supplanted any deities with a higher power that manifests in the lineage of the Mannon family itself; this is O'Neill's new dramatic interpretation of fate. There is mention of spirituality, as the townsfolk spread rumors of a haunting in the Mannon house at one point, and Orin speaks at length about both the spiritual visions he had during combat and the overwhelming sense of burden that he carries as the last living Mannon male.

II. Previous Action

- a. In terms of the Mannon women, both Lavinia and Christine have just returned from separate trips to New York City as the play opens. Christine had gone to the city under the guise of visiting a family member, though was actually traveling to meet the same Adam Brant that had been feigning interest in Lavinia in order to hide he and Christine's affair.. Lavinia followed her mother to the city in order to determine her true motives. Lavinia observed Christine visit Brant, and returned to the Mannon house shortly after. Christine, following her tryst with Brant, also returned home. Lavinia's suspicions about Christine lay the groundwork for their visibly faltering relationship at the beginning of *Homecoming*. The men of the Mannon house, on the other hand, have been away fighting the American Civil War with the Union Army. That war, though, has just come to an end: O'Neill's

stage directions note that *Homecoming* begins in April of 1865, and the Civil War ended approximately April ninth, 1865. Ezra himself also mentions the surrender of General Robert E. Lee and the concluding days of the war. Additionally, both Ezra and Orin's time in the war have changed them; Ezra now has come to realize that his wife and family are what matters in the time he has left (as it is noted in the play that he has a heart condition), while Orin has become disillusioned with reality and regrets fighting or killing for the Union at all. Orin also recently received a head injury, but is on the mend. Long before the beginning of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, it should be noted, an entirely separate family drama occurred within the Mannon house. Lavinia's grandfather Abe and his brother David fought for the love of the same woman years ago; David eventually ran off with the woman due to her pregnancy. The woman, who was a Canadian nurse by the name of Marie Brantôme working for the family to care for Ezra's deceased sister in their youth, gave birth to Adam Brant soon after. Abe, disgusted by both the romantic victory of his brother David and his own lustful thoughts, tore down the original Mannon house and constructed a new home in its place. Later on, and when Marie became ill, she sent a letter to Ezra asking him for help; this request went unfulfilled, and Brant swore to exact revenge on the Mannon family.

III. Polar Attitudes

a. Lavinia

- i. *About my world*: I feel like the world has begun conspiring against me and my best interests. Whether I like it or not, and whether I have time for it

or not, I have to be on the defensive. There are few people I can really trust.

- ii. *About my relationships*: I love my father and my brother more than words could describe. My mother, though, hates me, and I cannot help but resent her for it. I give my romantic love to Peter Niles, as Adam Brant has recently proven an unsavory character.
- iii. *About myself*: I often feel as though I am the last real Mannon, as Orin and my mother are not as passionate about the family history and prestige. I feel I am worthy of both familial and romantic love, but both have scorned me as of late.
- iv. *About my prospects*: My only prospect is to take the utmost care of my father, as I can trust no one else to care for him like I will. Perhaps someday I will marry Peter, but for now my sights are set on my father and his comfort.

b. Orin

- i. *About my world*: I always thought the world was a wonderful place in my childhood years, but have serious doubts since I began fighting in the war. I've seen atrocities and question myself and my world daily, but know there is safety and sense back home with my mother, sister, and Hazel.
- ii. *About my relationships*: I feel as though I have good relationships on the whole, but know that my father sees me as less than Lavinia. My mother is my closest ally, and my friends at home are supportive.

- iii. *About myself*: I feel like a shell of what I used to be lately. I've killed people in the war, and I both hate and pity myself for it. I want to be better, and I want to do so quickly.
- iv. *About my prospects*: Having fought in the war, my prospects look decent to me. If I'm able to overcome my pervading sense of loneliness and forlorn nostalgia, I can make something great of myself. I'm a Mannon, so I should not really have much to worry about.

IV. Dialogue

- a. Eugene O'Neill is known for his particular style of dialogue, and *Mourning Becomes Electra* certainly adheres to that style. If anything, it is a bolstering and perfecting of it, as many records indicate that even O'Neill, during the writing of the trilogy, repeatedly wished for some new discovery of "a language to write drama in! For a speech that is dramatic and not just conversation."³³ He would continue to further confide in his friends that he felt "so straight-jacketed by writing in terms of talk. I'm so fed up with the dodge question of dialect. But where to find that language?"³⁴ Whether or not he eventually found the language that he spoke of in these letters, the dialogue and scene settings of *Mourning Becomes Electra* (as well as his other later plays) remain some of O'Neill's most vivid and straightforward. He did, of course, tailor his characters' speech patterns and colloquialisms to the time period and setting of the plays: New England from 1865 to 1866. All of the Mannons speak in a distinctly upper-class, northern dialect, which, for many years, would be considered standard American speech.

³³ Sheaffer, *O'Neill, Son and Artist.*, 339.

³⁴ Sheaffer, 339.

The other characters in O'Neill's play, though, such as Seth and the chorus of townsfolk, speak in a more loosely stylized, middle to lower-class dialect common in and around Boston during that time period. This is especially noticeable in the chorus of townsfolk, as O'Neill has more or less written the brunt of their dialogue phonetically; characters like Seth often leave off the endings of specific words and speak words in noticeable dialect ("Ezra's made a pile, and before him, his father, Abe Mannon, he inherited some and made a pile more in shippin'. Started one of the fust Western Ocean packet lines").³⁵ Other characters like Minnie, a member of the chorus of townsfolk, mirror this often as well: "How'd he come to jine the army if he's so rich?"³⁶ O'Neill also mirrors the ideological content of his source material *The Oresteia* by utilizing the dialogical structures of the play. Considering that both *The Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* are stories "about the destruction of a family, the most commonly repeated significant word in [O'Neill's] trilogy is 'mother', uttered one hundred and sixty-two times. It is closely followed by 'love' (153 mentions), 'house' (151), and 'father' (133)."³⁷ Furthermore, a "tally of references to the sea, islands, sailing and ships comes out at one hundred and fifteen references,"³⁸ and despite the fact that "four of the five main characters (Ezra, Adam, Christine, and Orin) die and two of those four spend significant stage time discussing their role in the recent Civil War,"³⁹ O'Neill's characters "mention killing and death

³⁵ O'Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, 7.

³⁶ O'Neill, 7.

³⁷ Hunt, "Tragedy's Queer Afterlives," 145.

³⁸ Hunt, 145.

³⁹ Hunt, 145.

only one hundred and thirteen times” during the course of the drama, pointing us in a clear direction of what O’Neill thought was of most importance to the story he wanted to tell.⁴⁰ Additionally, O’Neill’s use of dialogue is repeatedly noted as being “colored in part by [his] experience of poetry and prose American literary influences such as Herman Melville, Stephen Crane and Walt Whitman.”⁴¹ Thus, O’Neill’s dialogue in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, though surely stylized to some degree, is some of his most direct and clear writing to that point of his career, and even perhaps his whole body of work.

V. Dramatic Action

- a. The plays, despite their length, move fairly swiftly through the events that sow ruin for the house of Mannon. And, while each play in the trilogy is also its own complete standalone storyline, the progression and ordering of the three plays very closely aligns with the traditional dramatic formula: the inciting events and rising action occur during *Homecoming*, the climax of the play occurs during *The Hunted*, and the falling action and resolution occur during *The Haunted*. In addition, while each of the individual plays contains their own story arcs that build and define the world of the play, the master arc of the trilogy is put into gradual motion by the major events of each individual play. That master arc concerns mostly the relationship between Orin and Lavinia, with some important focus allocated to the generational divide between parents and children. Ultimately, though, the action of each play progressively builds into Orin and Lavinia’s character arcs: that of their descent into what is essentially insanity.

⁴⁰ Hunt, 145.

⁴¹ Hunt, 143.

VI. Characters (at opening)

a. Lavinia

- i. Will: Lavinia knows what is most important to her, has a deep sense of familial honor, and already has a bright future.
- ii. Desire: Lavinia wants nothing more than to take care of her family and the people she loves.
- iii. Moral Stance: Lavinia values family, legacy, and duty (just like her father).
- iv. Decorum: Lavinia is a twenty-three year old white woman, who is tall and exceedingly thin, has copper-gold hair that she wears pulled back, and has quite angular features.
- v. Summary Adjectives: Lavinia is strong-willed, stubborn, dutiful, caring, and motivated.
- vi. Character-Mood Intensity (expressed in terms of):
 1. Heartbeat: Lavinia's heart rate is slightly elevated all the time, especially when around her mother.
 2. Perspiration: Lavinia sweats very little, but when she does, it is on her face.
 3. Stomach Condition: Ever so slightly unsettled.
 4. Muscle Tension: Lavinia is tensed just enough to be able to act with little warning, but not enough to be physically noticeable.
 5. Breathing: Lavinia breathes in a shallow manner, and her breathing quickens when interacting with anyone that is not her father.

b. Orin

- i. Will: Orin only thinks of returning to his mother and childhood life. His will to live and act is severely diminished due to his time in the war.
- ii. Desire: Orin wants to feel alive again, as well as recapture what he feels he has lost since he was a boy; what he lost in maturing during a major military conflict.
- iii. Moral Stance: Orin values truthfulness, love, tenderness, and understanding.
- iv. Decorum: Orin is a twenty year old white man that looks eerily similar to his father and Adam Brant. He has heavy eyebrows, a swarthy complexion, straight black hair, and light brown eyes. He looks oversensitive. He is thin, slouchy, and looks ten years older than he is. He wears a bandage on his head and his military uniform.
- v. Summary Adjectives: Orin is gentle, reserved, thoughtful, forlorn, and repressed.
- vi. Character-Mood Intensity (expressed in terms of):
 1. Heartbeat: Orin's heart no longer beats at a normal pace; it is just as repressed as he feels. It returns to some semblance of normality when around his mother.
 2. Perspiration: Orin sweats more now than he did before the war, and it is mostly in his pits.
 3. Stomach Condition: Orin's stomach is too weak to be unsettled.

4. *Muscle Tension*: Orin is somewhat relaxed, but falls easily into the uncomfortable tension he has gotten used to in combat.
5. *Breathing*: Orin breathes in long, deep breaths, especially now that he is finally home and can smell nostalgia in the air.

VII. Idea

- a. *Mourning Becomes Electra* is, at its purest, a “modern psychological play” about “fate springing out of the family,”⁴² but yet is so much more than simply that. It is an epic that focuses so pointedly on the idea of the Mannon fate as:

the physical and psychological heritage of their New England past, a heritage especially manifest in the current of Puritan frustration that runs through the entire action and seems to carry with it driftwood characters. All of the Mannons desire pure love and happiness, symbolized in the recurring dream of the South Sea Islands. But just as each is about to reach his Paradise Island, this hostile tide of frustration bears him or her away: Ezra, with knowledge of love he has gained from his contact with death and war, returns to express that love to his wife, and she kills him; Christine, by this murder, seeks to free herself for the love of Adam, but Lavinia thwarts her; Orin, by killing Adam, hopes to regain the exclusive love of his mother, but instead drives her, and then himself, to suicide; and finally, Lavinia attempts to escape the Mannon dead in a marriage with Peter, but discovers she cannot. However, if all the Mannons are borne away by the current of Puritan frustration, they are not mere driftwood. For they have plunged into the raging waters of family pride, hatred, and jealousy, and freely swim with the current; their tragedy is that they never see, or see too late, its direction.⁴³

O’Neill’s play is thus about the Mannon family and their conflict between fate and free will, but, as aforementioned in Chapter 1, is even more about the themes of fate and family than it is about the Mannons themselves. O’Neill has essentially taken the relationship between the gods and men of ancient Greece, and transliterated that struggle into a more modern age.

⁴² Sheaffer, *O’Neill, Son and Artist.*, 357.

⁴³ O’Neill, “The Tragic Theory of Eugene O’Neill,” 495.

VIII. Title

- a. The title *Mourning Becomes Electra*, for two reasons, is fitting for this piece. Of course, there is the more obvious meaning of the title: that Lavinia (O'Neill's version of Electra) cannot, for all her arduous effort, escape the death and mourning that plague her family lineage. Her entire immediate family, at least in O'Neill's version of the story, perishes, leaving Lavinia the sole inheritor and proprietor of the Mannon shame. Lavinia mourns not only for her deceased kin, but also for the downfall of the great Mannon heritage that has been inadvertently tarnished by Lavinia's efforts to protect it. At the conclusion of the trilogy, even, Lavinia must continue to mourn for herself and her failure to overcome the overbearing sense of fate that has been hanging over her family for generations. Additionally, the title infers that mourning literally becomes Electra; that the current Mannon kin's deep sense of mourning physically manifests itself within the character of Lavinia. Lavinia mourns for her father, her love for Adam Brant, her mother (though her mourning here is more out of resentment for what could have been between the two), her brother, and finally, her hope for love and escape with Peter. No matter what events transpire, Lavinia is left in the same state of mourning that she so desperately wants to flee from. Taking the individual titles of the plays that make the trilogy (*Homecoming*, *The Hunted*, and *The Haunted*), a fairly straightforward plot summary can be surmised. *Homecoming* refers to the return of Ezra Mannon, *The Hunted* refers to Orin and Lavinia's pursuit of their father's killers, and *The Haunted* refers to the psychological aftermath that plagues both Orin and Lavinia.

IX. Philosophical Statements

a. Philosophy holds a significant presence in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and there is no absence of philosophical matter. A few important highlights include:

- i. Freud and Modern Psychology: While O'Neill consistently denied taking inspiration from Freudian psychology in his development of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, it is impossible to separate Freud's theories of psychosexual development from the events of the play. O'Neill was clearly working with the concepts of Oedipal and Electra complexes in his mind as he mapped out the Mannon family structure. In short, contemporary terminology, the Oedipus complex can be described as "a challenge each child confronts, which might be expressed thus: how do I, as a psycho-sexual being, enter society?"⁴⁴ Essentially, Freud asserts that the mythos of Sophocles' Oedipus, the man destined by fate to marry his mother and kill his father, is a "simplification" that "describes us all, man and woman, boy and girl."⁴⁵ This is visible in both parental relationships of *Mourning Becomes Electra*; the close familial bonds between Orin and his mother Christine, as well as Lavinia and her father Ezra. It should be noted, though, that since the days that Freud initially theorized about the psyche there has been widespread consensus that his theories on psychosexuality do not stand the test of time. Mostly, Freud "has been criticized for not taking sufficient account of the wide variation in family structures

⁴⁴ Lear, *Freud*, 179.

⁴⁵ Lear, 179.

across cultures.”⁴⁶ In other words, his view was far too narrow to be both applicable and useful to contemporary psychology, and is no longer regarded as infallible psychological theory. This distinction will be mentioned in future chapters, as it is of vital importance to the work of recontextualizing the relationships present within O’Neill’s trilogy into the more recent past. Other Freudian concepts, though, that have better stood the test of time, are also present within O’Neill’s work. Orin’s dreams, for example, are also heavily influenced by Freudian psychology. Orin’s dream of killing men until their faces resemble his own, for instance, are prime area for Freud’s theory of manifest content: the building blocks of dreams that both point beyond themselves and reveal deep sources of desire from within the psyche of a given person.⁴⁷ Orin sees in his dreams what he believes to be, and even, in this case, will eventually be occurring in his real personal life. Orin does kill until the face of the dead resembles his; he even notes directly after murdering Brant that “he looks like me, too! Maybe I’ve committed suicide!”⁴⁸ Freud’s theory of dreams, of course, operates differently from Greek philosophers’ theories, but the outcome remains the same in this dramatic context. This is also true for the South Sea Islands that are referenced throughout the play, as characters often see these islands in their dreams and manifestations as a symbol of escape and purity. In the end, though, the islands do nothing but corrupt

⁴⁶ Lear, 178.

⁴⁷ Lear, 97.

⁴⁸ O’Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, 104.

Orin, Lavinia, and Christine; a clear juxtaposition of the healing and destructive powers of dreams in a psychological context.

- ii. Ghosts/Ghosting: While there are no ghosts explicitly seen within the plot of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, both the Mannon house and kin are undeniably plagued by one form of ghost or another. In a literal sense, *The Haunted* begins with the chorus of townsfolk discussing the hauntings of the empty Mannon house, as well as some betting as to who can remain in the abandoned home the longest. There are also mentions throughout the trilogy, whether by characters or O'Neill in his stage directions, that each generation of Mannon look at times as though they ghostly resemble other Mannon characters. This is especially noticeable in Lavinia and Orin when they return to the home in *The Haunted*, as Peter even mistakes Lavinia for Christine's ghost upon first seeing her. Orin, too, is noted as resembling the ghostly visage of his father. And, while this is certainly O'Neill drawing dramatic attention to both the intricate relationships between generations of Mannons and interrelationships within generations of Mannons, it also introduces an altogether separate phenomenon: Marvin Carlson's dramatic theory of ghosting. In his own words, Carlson describes this phenomenon as "the relationship between the preexisting dramatic text and its enactment onstage" as "one kind of 'haunting' that lies close to the structure of the theatrical experience."⁴⁹ O'Neill is echoing Aeschylus' source text and structure in his play, and both the

⁴⁹ Carlson, *The Haunted Stage*, 16.

characters, the set, the actors, and the stage itself are, in some form or another, conscious of this; it is impossible to ignore it. In one performance of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, there can be found all of the previous performances of O'Neill's play and all previous performances of Aeschylus' play. In addition, the characters within O'Neill's play are participants in this phenomenon as well, as a very similar moment of strife was faced by the Mannon family (in their handling of Marie Brantôme) generations before Orin and Lavinia would face it. This phenomenon is especially important to my recontextualized version of the play, and so will be expounded on in further detail in later chapters. It is, though, essential to O'Neill's vision of this story, and further can be applied to the conflict between fate and free will that the Mannons face.

- iii. Fate and the Mannon lineage: Throughout the play, and primarily *The Haunted*, Orin and Lavinia each become obsessed with what they believe to be the conflicting values of truth and honor. Especially where Ezra is concerned, Lavinia is willing to excuse all misdeeds of the past to keep her father and family's good name from being tarnished. Orin, on the other hand, feels immense guilt upon reviewing the misdeeds of not only himself, but his entire family, and becomes determined to set things right in the world of the Mannons by bringing their tempestuous history to light. Even before the events of *Homecoming*, these two values were at odds in the Mannon family drama with the advent of Marie Brantôme into the family structure. This juxtaposition of truth and honor in conflict sets the

events of the play in motion especially within *The Haunted*, but also the trilogy as a whole.

- iv. Justice: Just as the source material *The Oresteia* deals heavily with themes of justice in ancient Greece, so does *Mourning Becomes Electra* deal with justice in America. Orin, Lavinia, Brant, and Christine all seek justice in their own ways: Orin wishes to absolve his family of its sins by bringing justice to his lineage, Lavinia seeks retributive justice for her father via the deaths of Brant and Christine, Brant is consumed with the idea of vengeance for the injustices dealt to his mother by the Mannon kin, and Christine seeks her own justice for Ezra's laying her aside. And, just as *The Eumenides* serves as Aeschylus's examination of justice in the Grecian polis, O'Neill's *The Haunted* makes the same examination on a smaller, more intimate family scale.

X. Mood and Tone

- a. There is a pervading sense of futility throughout the script of this play. The dialogue and stage directions evoke a sense of burdensome heaviness, and each and every Mannon is affected by this unshakeable feeling. There is not a single moment of relief for the characters or the audience of the play, and the finale evokes emotions of hopelessness in the face of forces humanity cannot control, let alone define.

CHAPTER 3: ADAPTATION V. RECONTEXTUALIZATION

Now equipped with a deep understanding of *Mourning Becomes Electra* as a piece of dramatic literature, it is possible to fully engage in a discussion about O'Neill's creative methodologies in relation to the finished text. The delineation of chief importance to this chapter (and to this thesis) is between whether O'Neill was engaging in traditional adaptation or dramatic recontextualization while writing his trilogy. Responses to this query will very likely differ depending on the expertise and concentration of the scholars involved in the conversation, but I will here posit that Eugene O'Neill was, through his use of the source text for *Mourning Becomes Electra*, engaging in one of the very earliest observable forms of true dramatic recontextualization. There are, of course, still many elements of traditional adaptation present within O'Neill's work, but certain methodologies and phenomena present within the play's pages, coupled with O'Neill's working notes taken during the process of crafting the play suggest that O'Neill was striving for much more than a traditional adaptation of *The Oresteia*, even if he himself knew not what new form he was birthing in the process.

One observable phenomenon that lead to the conclusion that *Mourning Becomes Electra* is, indeed, early dramatic recontextualization has already been mentioned earlier. Marvin Carlson's theory of dramatic ghosting, though introduced in brief, can be further summarized as follows:

Indeed, the relationship between the preexisting dramatic text and its enactment onstage we can already speak of one kind of 'haunting' that lies close to the structure of the theatrical experience, in which the physical embodiment of an action that is witnessed in the theatre is in an important sense haunted by a preexisting text, a phenomenon that is particularly apparent in those eras, such as the present, when audiences often bring an acquaintance with this preexisting text with them to the theatre.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Carlson, 16.

More so than most contemporary drama, *Mourning Becomes Electra* exemplifies this concept in its writing and performance, as *The Oresteia* is undoubtedly echoed in every aspect of production and reception of the play. While familiarity with Aeschylus' trilogy is not an essential preparation for a viewing of O'Neill's trilogy, it is difficult, if not impossible, to escape the intertextual relationship between the two pieces. In a very general sense, "all texts are in fact haunted by other texts and can be best understood as weavings together of preexisting textual material—indeed, that all reception is based upon this intertextual dynamic."⁵¹ Whether or not the viewer or reader of *Mourning Becomes Electra* is aware of it, this intertextuality and, as Carlson calls it, ghosting is present within every fiber of the play itself. The characters that populate O'Neill's fictional world are not O'Neill's to do with entirely as he wishes; there are tropes and archetypes that he is bound to follow and build upon, lest he no longer be utilizing any form of source material at all (unless, of course, O'Neill's intent was to subvert these archetypes, which is not the case in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but will be discussed in a later section as a common strategy of recontextualization). This is especially true when working with widely known and adapted dramatic texts, such as Shakespeare and the Greek writers of antiquity. In the words of Carlson:

...the dramatic text is distinguished in part by the extent and specificity of its relationship to previous texts, literary and nonliterary. Among all literary forms it is the drama preeminently that has always been centrally concerned not simply with the telling of stories but with the retelling of stories already known to its public. This process naturally involves but goes far beyond the recycling of references, tropes, even structural elements and patterns that intertextuality considers. It involves the dramatist in the presentation of a narrative that is haunted in almost every aspect—its names, its character relationships, the structure of its action, even small physical or linguistic details—by a specific previous narrative.⁵²

⁵¹ Carlson, 17.

⁵² Carlson, 17.

The inescapable ghosting of not only *The Oresteia*, but every production of and based on Aeschylus' original work, is undoubtedly present within the pages of *Mourning Becomes Electra*. In addition, O'Neill must have had some idea of the phenomenon long before Carlson ever put his thoughts to page, as not only does his body of work (specifically *Ah, Wilderness!* and *Long Day's Journey Into Night*) utilize the notion of the haunted stage, *Mourning Becomes Electra* relishes in it.

Ghosting as a phenomenon, though, cannot solely delineate between adaptation and recontextualization here; there is far more at play. In order to better extrapolate upon the methodologies that delineate the processes of transliteration and traditional adaptation from dramatic recontextualization, though, this thesis will utilize a recently published play from a different author that operates in a very similar manner to *Mourning Becomes Electra*: Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *An Octoroon*.

AN OCTOROON AS TEXTBOOK RECONTEXTUALIZATION

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' 2014 play *An Octoroon*, which is his recontextualization of Dion Boucicault's 1859 play *The Octoroon* that this thesis recognizes as the gold standard for dramatic recontextualization, is similar to O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* in a multitude of ways. Of course, as previously mentioned, Jacobs-Jenkins' piece, also being based upon an earlier piece of drama, both contains and purposely utilizes Carlson's theory of ghosting; Jacobs-Jenkins makes a point of ensuring the audience is aware of Boucicault's play, the world in which it was set and produced, and the structural apparatus of its genre (melodrama). Not only does he ensure his audience is aware of the historical and cultural background of *The Octoroon*, but Jacobs-Jenkins also uses this awareness to subvert character tropes, scenarios, and dramatic

etiquette in much the same way that O'Neill utilizes his audience's knowledge of *The Oresteia* to bolster the same elements of his script. Likewise, while O'Neill uses the ghosting of Aeschylus to create the sense of haunting present throughout his trilogy, Jacobs-Jenkins uses the ghosting of *The Octoroon* to innovate. During *An Octoroon*'s take on Boucicault's infamous lynching scene, for example:

These innovations force the audience to become complicit in the trial and its bloody aftermath and simultaneously bring the audience as close to a sensation of death as possible without burning the theatre down around them. This eye-catching and difficult scene, which I call reconstruction, is a key part of Jacobs-Jenkins' compilation of theatrical techniques. Collectively, these techniques teach Jacob-Jenkins' twenty-first-century audience to respond both on a theatrical and a racial level in order to work in a manner they would not have been able to otherwise.⁵³

This idea of reconstruction posited in the above quotation is, at its core, very similar to what this thesis considers recontextualization. And, despite these two products of recontextualization working in seemingly opposite directions, the methodology is what allows their respective writers to achieve this fluidity of intertextual performance. These strategies and "reconstructions allow Jacobs-Jenkins to transform Dion Boucicault's wildly influential melodrama *The Octoroon* into his own version, *An Octoroon*", where the "two plays follow essentially the same plot" despite Jacobs-Jenkins "crucial changes to the universe of *The Octoroon*," just as O'Neill's trilogy is transformed by essentially these same processes.⁵⁴ And, in the same way that a viewing of *Mourning Becomes Electra* echoes viewings, productions, and the history of *The Oresteia*, "watching *An Octoroon* is not the same as watching *The Octoroon*, yet an audience member does have an experience that accesses and parallels its antecedent."⁵⁵

⁵³ "Anyway, the Whole Point of This Was to Make You Feel Something."

⁵⁴ "Anyway, the Whole Point of This Was to Make You Feel Something."

⁵⁵ Rowen, "People Come to the Theatre to Feel Something Old," 83.

Another prominent strategy of recontextualization that delineates it from traditional adaptation and is utilized within the methodologies of both *An Octoroon* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the inclusion of sedimented time. The idea of sedimented time is most succinctly described as “the imbrication of elements of different time periods or cultures,” and operates explicitly within *An Octoroon* and implicitly within *Mourning Becomes Electra*.⁵⁶ Like Carlson’s theory of ghosting, sedimented time involves intentional fussing with the theatricality of the world created onstage. In Jacobs-Jenkins’ play, for instance, “the most extensive example of sedimented time is a linguistic and aural discrepancy between the wider nineteenth-century setting and way in which some of the enslaved characters speak when they are alone. When they address other black characters, they use contemporary slang, and a version of African-American Vernacular English (AAVE).”⁵⁷ The outcome of this “use of sedimented time is striking because it is the only element of these characters that is out-of-sync with the world around them.”⁵⁸ This type of sedimented time, though, can also be found within *Mourning Becomes Electra* on a few, albeit some more indirect, levels. Of course, O’Neill’s change of setting but retention of plot and dynamic functions is one major instance of sedimented time; while O’Neill strays from ripping the language of Aeschylus from *The Oresteia* and inserting it into his trilogy (something that Jacobs-Jenkins does throughout much of *An Octoroon*), he does however juxtapose the aesthetics of the American Civil War with ancient Greece. In the opening stage directions of *Homecoming*, O’Neill notes that “behind the drive the white Grecian temple portico with its six tall columns extends across the stage. A big pine tree is on the lawn at the edge of the drive before the right

⁵⁶ Schneider, “Race and Performative Historiography in the American Theatre, 1991-2014,” 55.

⁵⁷ Schneider, 57.

⁵⁸ Schneider, 57.

corner of the house. Its trunk is a black column in striking contrast to the white columns of the portico.”⁵⁹ He also notes that:

It is shortly before sunset and the soft light of the declining sun shines directly on the front of the house, shimmering in a luminous mist on the white portico and the grey stone wall behind, intensifying the whiteness of the columns, the sombre greyness of the wall, the green of the open shutters, the green of the lawn and shrubbery, the black and green of the pine tree. The white columns cast black bars of shadow on the grey wall behind them. The windows of the lower storey reflect the sun’s rays in a resentful glare. The temple portico is like an incongruous white mask fixed on the house to hide its somber grey ugliness.⁶⁰

Right off the bat, O’Neill is very interested in retaining some aspects of *The Oresteia* in the design and vision of his trilogy, even if this usage of sedimented time is strictly visual as opposed to Jacobs-Jenkins’ aural representation. Additionally, each of O’Neill’s Mannon characters is repeatedly described as having features reminiscent of a mask, another explicit usage of sedimented time that he had, in earlier drafts, toyed with fully realizing with actual Greek drama masks in production. The mere mention of these features, though, points to O’Neill being interested in the juxtaposition of the ancient Greek and Civil War era United States. Furthermore, O’Neill retains the usage of a chorus inspired largely by ancient Greek traditions of drama, only deepening the Grecian roots and use of sedimented time in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

Sedimented time, though, is but one of many strategies that these writers utilized to take their work out of the realm of adaptation and into the realm of recontextualization. Also vital to most cases of dramatic recontextualization is the intentional shifting of the focus or gaze of the source material. Jacobs-Jenkins accomplishes this by repurposing Boucicault’s characters and

⁵⁹ O’Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, 5.

⁶⁰ O’Neill, 5.

plot to serve a new purpose of his own invention: the drawing of attention to the relationship between race, melodrama, and meta-theatricality. In essence:

Knowing this history helps us to understand the effect of Jacobs-Jenkins reconstructions. As part of this reconstruction, Jacobs-Jenkins chooses several tools that are essential to melodrama, including the sensation scene, the tableau, acting styles, and staging methods, and then fundamentally changes their core by altering melodrama's gaze. 'Melodrama's gaze' refers to what could be included on stage in these productions: the plotlines that were of interest to the consumers and creators, the characters who could embody those stories, as well as the tools and techniques used to actualize these narratives.⁶¹

O'Neill accomplishes the same outcome via similar methodology within *Mourning Becomes Electra*, evident by the notes he made and letters he sent regarding his initial drafting of the trilogy. Chiefly, his questioning of whether it is "possible to get modern psychological approximation of the Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of today, possessed of no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?"⁶² provides insight into his earliest desires to shift the gaze of the play. O'Neill realized that his focus was not equivalent to Aeschylus' vision of *The Oresteia* (that is, the retribution of gods), and made a conscious effort to re-focus *Mourning Becomes Electra* on the notions of family and fate; this is, by and large, the same strategy that Jacobs-Jenkins utilizes in his realization of *An Octoroon*. In both cases, this shifting of focus in combination with sedimented time "results in a collapsing of boundaries between past and present" and "represents past abuses in present terms so they cannot be dismissed as belonging only to an earlier time."⁶³ This helps to establish a liminal space for the timeless action to take place and flow between the time periods represented in both O'Neill and Jacobs-Jenkins plays; a space that evokes "a no-time, that is neither the past

⁶¹ "Anyway, the Whole Point of This Was to Make You Feel Something."

⁶² Schlam, "Eugene O'Neill and the Creative Process," 88.

⁶³ Schneider, "Race and Performative Historiography in the American Theatre, 1991-2014," 64.

nor the present.”⁶⁴ It is by deliberately shifting the gaze of both *An Octoroon* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* that these writers move fully out of traditional adaptation and into the world of recontextualization.

In addition to the aforementioned strategies, processes, and methodologies of recontextualization, it is equally as important to consider the background work that these writers engaged with in order to successfully engage in the process of recontextualization.

Recontextualization as a methodology is, at its very core, a scholarly endeavor, as it involves significant research to most effectively utilize. In interviews with Jacobs-Jenkins, for example, he notes that, in regards to efforts of recontextualization such as *An Octoroon* and *Everybody*, he “honestly approach[es] things like I’m researching a paper.”⁶⁵ And, while Jacobs-Jenkins has been rather forthcoming with descriptions of his research process, O’Neill was less so; it can only be assumed by Carlotta’s descriptions of O’Neill “working daily in his tower study, including Christmas and New Year’s” that he was solely devoted to the process of correctly recontextualizing *The Oresteia*.⁶⁶ This is not to say, though, that the fruit of O’Neill’s efforts in creating *Mourning Becomes Electra* are inferior to those of Jacobs-Jenkins in *An Octoroon*; it simply implies the distance and evolution between O’Neill’s quite early interpretation of recontextualization and Jacobs-Jenkins very contemporary building upon it. Jacobs-Jenkins himself has noted that “all forms of literature [he] reads are expressed in his work, continuing to bring audience members to the theatre to experience something old in the guise of something new.”⁶⁷ It is entirely possible that Jacobs-Jenkins took inspiration from the writings of O’Neill, as he makes it widely known that he has considered (and is still considering) adapting *The*

⁶⁴ Schneider, 65.

⁶⁵ Rowen, “People Come to the Theatre to Feel Something Old,” 94.

⁶⁶ Sheaffer, *O’Neill, Son and Artist.*, 354.

⁶⁷ Rowen, “People Come to the Theatre to Feel Something Old,” 85.

Emperor Jones and other O'Neill pieces as well. His familiarity with O'Neill's canon, while not explicitly confirmed by Jacobs-Jenkins, very likely could have much to do with his own processes and methodologies of recontextualization.

CULTURAL (R)EVOLUTION

In many cases of dramatic recontextualization even beyond the confines of O'Neill and Jacobs-Jenkins, there is a traceable thread that, when followed closely, leads this thesis to posit that the evolution and revolution of culture are a very common seed through which contemporary recontextualization sprouts. In recent years especially, and as American recontextualists like Jacobs-Jenkins note, race and the politics of race lend themselves very easily to the processes of reclaiming and re-focusing that are so essential to contemporary dramatic recontextualization. History itself, as well, serves as a jumping-off point for many examples of recontextualization in the theatre today. In these cases, which are as of yet a small portion under the vast umbrella of recontextualization, there is not necessarily a dramatic or literary predecessor to serve as source material. What materializes instead of a re-centering of source text is then most often a re-centering of historical, political, or cultural narrative. In plays like Jeremy O. Harris' *Slave Play*, Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview*, Jacobs-Jenkins' *Appropriate*, and Claudia Rankine's *The White Card*, the writer is primarily focused on recontextualizing the current state of affairs, especially racial, within the United States. Jacobs-Jenkins, for example, notes his admiration of Irish writers like Eugene O'Neill and Brian Friel sprouts from the notion that "what they're always working through is an identity crisis in the context of political changes;"⁶⁸ something equally applicable to Ireland as it is to the United States. And, because of this deep connection

⁶⁸ Rowen, 91.

between political, racial, historical, and cultural turmoil, it is plausible to assert that recontextualization often (but not always) materializes as a reaction to and tool for revolution. These plays consistently ask “the audience to participate in the re-engagement and re-examination of the past, the historiography portion of performative historiography,”⁶⁹ and ground themselves in the deep-rooted traditions of the past in order to better critique and recontextualize the present. And, as aforementioned, while this practice is not consistent throughout all examples of contemporary dramatic recontextualization, the recontextualization of history and culture themselves warrants both mention and further study as this trend continues to materialize within the realm of drama. I do, however, predict this trend to expand exponentially in the coming years, especially with the current advent of plays like James Ijames *Fat Ham* and musicals like *Six* garnering both generous critical acclaim and audience interest.

THEATRE “HISTORY” AND THE LIFE CYCLE OF MATERIAL

Before moving on from this thesis’ discussion of the delineation between adaptation and recontextualization and moving into the performance as research aspect of the project, there are some connections between the process of recontextualization and the notion of theatre history that warrant exploration. The word history in the above title for this section is placed within quotation marks for a reason; there is an undeniable trend taking place in the theatre that permeates our sense of what theatre history is and can be. In the last decade of entertainment media alone, and especially where Broadway is concerned, there has been a constant, unwavering groan regarding the perceived state of continual recycling in American theatre. Instead of new and original plays and musicals, it seems that only those concepts that have

⁶⁹ Schneider, “Race and Performative Historiography in the American Theatre, 1991-2014,” 191.

proven to be successful in the past now make it to Broadway; this is clear in the fascination with and abundance of re-mounts of productions, revivals of productions, and adaptations of other established media arriving on the Broadway scene. *The SpongeBob SquarePants* and *Beetlejuice* musical adaptations are recent examples of this phenomenon, but it extends far into the reaches of television and film as well with the constant need to refresh (as with the most recent iteration of the *Scooby Doo* franchise, *Velma*) or expand upon (unnecessary sequels, prequels, etc.) existing media. While some are eager to identify this phenomenon as an issue plaguing contemporary society, it should be noted that this phenomenon is not new, nor is it necessarily symbolic of the death of creativity. Contemporary theatre makers like Jacobs-Jenkins, for instance, rather relish in the idea that all storytelling relies on past narratives, and even goes so far as to assert that “the truth is—that people don’t want to admit—is people come to the theatre to feel something old.”⁷⁰ Elaborating upon this idea, Jacobs-Jenkins continues with the thought that “it’s so funny, this idea that we go to the theatre to see something new is such a weird lie we tell ourselves. I think we’re looking at new ways into the old, certainly. I think the only way you’re going to find those ways is if you know the old ways into the old.”⁷¹ Jacob-Jenkins, finally, concludes that “it’s like we’re actually there to experience the old—not the eternal, but to experience the beyond present.”⁷² O’Neill, of course, had undoubtedly followed the same thread of thought processes while constructing *Mourning Becomes Electra*, noting that he “understood that adapting the general plot of the *Oresteia* virtually assured the play would have drama and suspense,”⁷³ rendering it near-impossible to fail with an audience. O’Neill, however, saw something in *The Oresteia* that warranted deeper recontextualizing for a modern audience, and

⁷⁰ Rowen, “People Come to the Theatre to Feel Something Old,” 92.

⁷¹ Rowen, 92.

⁷² Rowen, 92.

⁷³ Schlam, “Eugene O’Neill and the Creative Process,” 94.

formulated his own story to tell utilizing the frameworks that Aeschylus had provided in his original plays.

Furthermore, when considering the implications of re-using and re-hashing material, the processes of recontextualization can also be seen as an act of extending the life cycle of the original source material. Jacobs-Jenkins, regarding his recent teaching of playwriting, notes that “the sneak-attack argument is that, for whatever reason, writing for the theatre has always been rooted in reinterpretation and adaptation. So actually, roots of what we do has always been the retelling or reframing of stories that exist already, because the success of the theatre is based on the success of a social understanding.”⁷⁴ And, while this practice of borrowing and building upon is, as Jacobs-Jenkins states, not a remotely new development, he also notes that this shared sense of media or “theatre history is just one way of being inspired by the past.”⁷⁵ The notion that there are no truly new ideas, and that all of not only theatre history, but entertainment history as a whole is linked intertextually with the narratives and storytelling of past generations is not only sensible, but removes the pressure to create something never before conceived of. What then begins to matter more than the differences between source material and its recontextualized counterpart is what links the material together; by reading *Mourning Becomes Electra*, one is at once able to both appreciate O’Neill’s vision of the play, as well as gain an entry point into the work of Aeschylus and the narrative of *The Oresteia*. The same is undoubtedly true for Jacobs-Jenkins’ *An Octoroon* and Boucicault’s *The Octoroon*. To deny the linkage between source material and adaptation or recontextualization only distances readers and watchers alike from the rich intertextuality that drama is able to evoke. In much the same way, theatre history can then be read backwards and forwards, as opposed to linearly; what do we learn from reading O’Neill

⁷⁴ Rowen, “People Come to the Theatre to Feel Something Old,” 87.

⁷⁵ Rowen, 84.

to Aeschylus, as opposed to the other way around? This thesis has already argued that dramatic recontextualization is indeed different from traditional adaptation, and the versatility of this circular definition of theatre history only further proves that assertion. Reading *Mourning Becomes Electra* is, in many ways, reading *The Oresteia*, and *The Oresteia*, likewise, is in many ways reading *Mourning Becomes Electra*. It is simply the storytelling and socio-cultural significance that has evolved over time, but the narrative remains largely the same. When it comes down to it, theatre history, in the context of adaptation and recontextualization, is not simply the timeline of major events that shaped contemporary drama from antiquity to the present, but it is also the collective social tradition of storytelling and narrative iteration that connects humanity through time. And, while the life cycle of individual material may well continue to shorten in the coming years, the processes of theatre history, dramatic adaptation, and recontextualization will continue to remain as intimately connected as they have been for millennia.

CHAPTER 4: RECONTEXTUALIZED EXCERPT & ADDITIONAL NOTES

Having unpacked Eugene O’Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and the notion of dramatic recontextualization as a whole, the work of this thesis now shifts into the realm of performance as research. In the following chapter, I will provide a summary of my research from a playwright’s perspective working on a recontextualization of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, as well as a finished scene excerpt accompanied by notes on methodology and process. This chapter acts as the culmination of my work with O’Neill’s play, and also the springboard for future work on not only *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but dramatic recontextualization as a whole.

PRELIMINARY PLAYWRIGHT’S HOMEWORK

Before embarking upon the process of recontextualizing *Mourning Becomes Electra* for the present day, baseline research needed to be completed in order to identify the strongest connections between the world that O’Neill created and the world we now inhabit. Initially, I was extremely interested in the effects of combat on active military personnel, specifically concerning the rate of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder diagnoses coupled with the rate of suicide attempts post-homecoming. And, because I had already chosen to set the play just following the United States’ exit from Afghanistan, I narrowed the view of my research work to the years since the United States first established a presence in the Middle East. My initial hypothesis that mental health problems continue to run rampant within the United States military, and in fact have only worsened since the beginning of conflict in Afghanistan, was proven correct. Overall,

The mental and physical health consequences of service in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom [OEF]) and Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom [OIF]) have been well documented. Studies report rates of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among returning soldiers ranging from 4% to 31% and rates of depression ranging from 3% to 25%, with rates varying by diagnostic criteria, military population, deployment location,

and time since deployment. Traumatic brain injury has been identified in 19% of returning troops.⁷⁶

This statistic in particular was quite useful to my thoughts on a modern-era *Mourning Becomes Electra*, as I already knew that I wanted to shift the focus to the Lavinia and Orin archetypes; Orin is even noted by O’Neill to be wounded in combat when he returns to New England.⁷⁷ The same study also notes that “deployed soldiers scored significantly lower than nondeployed soldiers on almost every measure of mental and physical health,” which bolstered my previous thoughts on Orin’s (and perhaps even Ezra’s) likely condition following the conflict, as it can easily be inferred that non-military personnel generally fare better on the same assessments than any form of military member.⁷⁸ Furthermore, another study found that “deployment and exposure to combat result[s] in increased risk of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), major depression, substance abuse, functional impairment in social and employment settings, and increased use of health care services” alongside the observation that “17% of soldiers and Marines who returned from Iraq screened positive for PTSD, generalized anxiety, or depression, a prevalence nearly twice that observed among soldiers surveyed before deployment.”⁷⁹ And as if that data was not sufficient, the same study concludes that “mental health problems reported on [a] postdeployment assessment were significantly associated with combat experiences, mental health care referral and utilization, and attrition from military service. Thirty-five percent of Iraq war veterans accessed mental health services in the year after returning home;” my take on the

⁷⁶ “Effects of Repeated Deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan on the Health of New Jersey Army National Guard Troops: Implications for Military Readiness | AJPH | Vol. 100 Issue 2,” 276.

⁷⁷ O’Neill, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, 67.

⁷⁸ “Effects of Repeated Deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan on the Health of New Jersey Army National Guard Troops: Implications for Military Readiness | AJPH | Vol. 100 Issue 2,” 278.

⁷⁹ Hoge, Auchterlonie, and Milliken, “Mental Health Problems, Use of Mental Health Services, and Attrition From Military Service After Returning From Deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan,” 1030.

Orin archetype undoubtedly suffered as one of those nearly one in three military members needing mental health care after returning from deployment.⁸⁰

In addition to the prevalence of mental health diagnoses in post-deployment military members, I was also interested in both the effects of military conflict on rates of suicide and spousal or familial issues after returning home, primarily because of traits I observed within the character Christine and Orin's eventual suicide in *The Haunted*. The post-war relationships between the Mannons appear especially strained in O'Neill's play, and I wanted to intentionally hone in on the effects of combat on a family in my recontextualization by shifting the gaze of O'Neill's work. And, yet again, my hypothesis proved correct; recent research has shown that "deployment has psychosocial consequences for the spouses of military personnel" and observed "increased levels of anxiety, stress, depression, marital maladjustment and an increase in inter-partner violence" following deployment.⁸¹ Not only that, but the same study also observed that "a further risk factor for mental health problems in spouses may be the absence of military partners during critical periods such as pregnancy. Deployment during pregnancy correlates with an almost three-fold increased risk of postpartum depression in partners."⁸² This information is astounding considering the events of *Mourning Becomes Electra*; Christine's entire psyche and eventual hatred for Ezra results in large part to her pregnancy with Orin while Ezra was away. And, while O'Neill was aiming to remove the gods from fate where the Mannons are concerned, the foresight he displays in his handling of Christine's character speaks to not only his prowess as a writer, but also the constancy of the negative effects associated with any war, be it in Afghanistan or on American soil. The study continues: "as well as a potential

⁸⁰ Hoge, Auchterlonie, and Milliken, 1023.

⁸¹ de Burgh et al., "The Impact of Deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan on Partners and Wives of Military Personnel," 192.

⁸² de Burgh et al., 193.

cause of stress in the pregnant spouse, deployment may influence the way in which the pregnancy is viewed by the spouse. In fact, feelings of anxiety and conflict regarding the pregnancy and impending birth in each trimester were significantly increased if military personnel had deployed in the first trimester.”⁸³ In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, Christine speaks at length about her conflicting feelings toward her pregnancy with Orin, possibly identifying a cause of the rift that has grown between her and Ezra, as well as her and the rest of the family. In the present day, though, it should also be noted that “a further possible risk factor for stress in pregnancy may be the representation of the conflict in the media.”⁸⁴ While not as pertinent to O’Neill’s play, this detail could be of major consequence to a contemporary recontextualization of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, as the saturation of new media has only grown since O’Neill’s original writing of his play. The aforementioned information on military spouses has led me to both rationalize the emotions of Christine in O’Neill’s play, but also recontextualize them to match the shifted gaze of my version of the play. In terms of the Orin archetype and his eventual suicide, research confirms my suspicions again, and suggests that “the rate of suicide attempts in the US Army increased sharply during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.”⁸⁵ More specifically, “from January 1, 2004, through December 31, 2009, the Army experienced the longest sustained increase in suicide rates relative to other US military branches.”⁸⁶ Furthermore, “risk was elevated during the first tour of duty, particularly the initial months after entering Army service.”⁸⁷ So, while Orin’s motives for his suicide in *Mourning Becomes Electra* were driven by the guilt he felt over both the loss of his mother as well as his inappropriate feelings for his

⁸³ de Burgh et al., 198.

⁸⁴ de Burgh et al., 198.

⁸⁵ Ursano et al., “Suicide Attempts in the US Army During the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, 2004 to 2009,” 917.

⁸⁶ Ursano et al., 918.

⁸⁷ Ursano et al., 923.

sister, new data has led me to believe that the Orin character archetype in a contemporary recontextualization may harbor motivations more closely related to his recent military service. Hence, my initial thoughts on recontextualizing *Mourning Becomes Electra* began to flesh themselves out in contemporary research, and I began to formulate the themes that I would focus on in my recontextualization; O’Neill’s play, in the present day, is a play about the deconstruction of family following a bloody conflict, and is ghosted by the participants in bloody conflict long before.

Another important facet of my recontextualization work relates to a central aspect of *Mourning Becomes Electra*: Freud. As aforementioned in earlier chapters, Freud’s thoughts on psychoanalysis and the psychosexual have somewhat shifted from scientific theorem into the realm of art theory, and I believe that, while the Oedipus and Electra complexes that O’Neill was interested in do not fit as well into my own work, that does not mean that Freud need be entirely absent. In an effort to recontextualize Freud’s presence in *Mourning Becomes Electra*, and to stay consistent with the shifting of the play’s gaze, I decided that it was necessary to research and incorporate another aspect of Freud’s work into my recontextualization; I specifically wanted to consider Freud’s thoughts on war. Having lived through the events of the first World War, as well as seeing the subsequent rise of fascism in Europe, Freud philosophized about the causes, effects, and implications of war on the human psyche. Much of his writing on war relates directly to his theory of the death drive; something that Freud essentially believes is the innate root cause of all destruction and aggression among humanity. War, Freud further thought, was “the biggest possible explosion of the death drive,”⁸⁸ as it represented the constant need for man to “save ourselves by destroying.”⁸⁹ Ultimately, Freud theorized that all “culture tends towards

⁸⁸ Belilos, *Freud and War*, 66.

⁸⁹ Belilos, 72.

man's destruction," a thought mirrored and likely inspired by his observations of the brutal combat of the first World War; combat that utilized weaponry and tactics never seen before.⁹⁰

Clearly, Freud's thoughts on the cruelty of man sprouted from the same violence he observed in the early twentieth century, just as O'Neill's views on war and culture did. Also of worth to note, though, was Freud's more metaphysical thoughts on death (which often were coupled with his thoughts on war). Freud accepted death as a natural part of life, and even considered the combat of war "a self-destructive, suicidal act [that] is also an ultimate reaching out to life."⁹¹ This duality of life and death in the final moments of a human lifespan lends itself well to the scenario that O'Neill creates between Orin and Lavinia in the final acts of *The Haunted*, as both Orin's literal and Lavinia's metaphorical suicides are in direct response to their overwhelming desire to live. When neither is allowed by the universe to live their life, their only recourse (in their minds) is to reach out to life through death. This duality of the death drive is not only limited to Orin and Lavinia, though, as Freud further asserts that "the death drive is what tends to 'reduce life to its original condition of inanimate matter.'"⁹² In addition, Freud notes that "all drives tend towards re-establishing a previous state, going as far back as the inanimate;" something that very closely aligns with my vision for recontextualizing *Mourning Becomes Electra*.⁹³ In my recontextualization, I attempt to utilize Freud's thought process here by placing special emphasis on the regressive quality and ghosting of the relationship between *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the *Oresteia*. Furthermore, I attempt to layer the present day on top of this history, and aim to highlight the regressive quality of my work to O'Neill's work and O'Neill's work to the work of Aeschylus. The presence of all three time periods and narratives

⁹⁰ Belilos, 64.

⁹¹ Belilos, 72.

⁹² Belilos, 73.

⁹³ Belilos, 73.

within one great Mannon house opens up opportunity for the actualization of Carlson's theory of ghosting in production, where the three families of characters are not only interconnected, but interact physically. This triple layering of context then provides the basis of my recontextualization. Freud, in the end, considers whether there is any way to escape the paradox of the death drive and human aggression, and theorizes that "there certainly is not if we think we can remove these destructive forces, forces that are ever-present since they are paradoxically necessary when confronting the subjective precariousness that life entails—life which is only a short 'detour on the journey to death.'"⁹⁴ The notion of life as a detour to death is fitting for a play such as *Mourning Becomes Electra*, as O'Neill's characters want so badly to live, yet are doomed to die; what they all fail to realize is the journey of life has been tarnished for them via not only the uncontrollable chaos of the universe, but also their own hubris. This is the primary interpretive framework with which I drafted my recontextualization of *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

PERIOD/HISTORICAL COMPARISONS

When dealing with dramatic texts and working to recontextualize them, special attention must be paid to the differing time periods in which each individual piece is set; this is more than true when recontextualizing *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Though much of this work is completed within the analysis of O'Neill's play and by conducting additional research on *The Oresteia* as necessary, it is essential to consider the intertextuality of history where these plays are concerned. In recontextualizing O'Neill's play, I needed to deal with a multitude of time periods: ancient Greece, Civil War era America, O'Neill's lifetime, and the contemporary United

⁹⁴ Belilos, 77.

States. Primarily, though, in terms of what is visible within the recontextualization, the areas of most concern can be narrowed, and my recontextualization deals mostly with Civil War and Afghan war era America (though ancient Greece does make appearances as well, and plays major parts in the unfolding of the narrative). These three settings all appear at some point within my recontextualization of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, thanks in part to my utilization of sedimented time. In order to represent the ghosting of each of these plays upon the other, I decided to actualize this not only in the props and set of the play, but also with appearances of characters from both *The Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

O'Neill, of course, uses the period of time immediately following the American Civil War to evoke the same sense of deconstruction that Aeschylus does in his use of the Trojan War. O'Neill saw the comparison between these two military conflicts as an easy way to bring the story of *The Oresteia* into recent, yet not present, history. In fact, O'Neill intended for his audience to feel some sort of distance between the time that *Mourning Becomes Electra* was produced and the American Civil War; this was mostly due to his belief that a modern audience would not be able to fully believe in the power of both fate and its interaction with the familial structure that Aeschylus executed so well in *The Oresteia*.⁹⁵ Thus, O'Neill set his play back into recent history to create the distance he thought was required for the narrative's success. My recontextualization, on the other hand, places the mostly borrowed narrative in the present day. While O'Neill searched for a period of time from which the audience could distance themselves, I aimed to put the Mannon lineage as close to the current era as possible, in order to ensure there was no escape from the tragic circumstances of the narrative. O'Neill's play acts as more of a direct retelling of *The Oresteia* than my recontextualization does of *Mourning Becomes Electra*;

⁹⁵ Sheaffer, *O'Neill, Son and Artist.*, 337.

O'Neill was working with reviving the epic narrative for a modern audience, and I am working to question what his finished product means for an audience today? In other words, my recontextualization explores what has fundamentally changed about society since both Aeschylus and O'Neill brought their stories to the stage. Due to the nature of this delineation, my work is able to explore a much wider scope of material while also being bolstered by the history behind the narrative and dramatic structures of its predecessors. Thus, by shifting the gaze of O'Neill's work to the social deconstruction of post-war American families, utilizing sedimented time to physically represent the storied lineage of both the characters and the plays on stage, and physicalizing the interactions between three generations of archetypal characters via ghosting, my work on *Mourning Becomes Electra* exemplifies the primary tenets of recontextualization.

LINEAGE EXCERPT & COMMENTARY

The following section consists of a small excerpt from my recontextualization of *Mourning Becomes Electra* (which I've given the working title *Lineage*), as well as some discussion of the work done on the scene as it relates to the goals of this thesis. The scene I have included currently concludes the first act of *Lineage*, which I have also condensed to a modern two act structure. For the purposes of simplifying readers' understanding, I have also included a cast breakdown before the beginning of the excerpt.

CHARACTERS

EZRA MANNON II	Also plays EZRA I and AGAMEMNON
KRIS MANNON	his wife, also plays CHRISTINE and CLYTEMNESTRA
OLIVIA MANNON	their daughter, also plays LAVINIA and ELECTRA
OWEN MANNON	their son, also plays ORIN and ORESTES
ANTHONY	also plays ADAM BRANT and AEGISTHUS
PARKER	Owen's friend, from the US military, also plays PETER NILES
HAZEL	his sister, also plays HAZEL NILES
SETH BECKWITH	the old family retainer and gardener

SCENE: 1865-66 New England, Ancient Greece, and 2022 New England, at the Mannon House.

Sometimes all at once.

ACT I: *HOMECOMING*

SCENE 5

(The study at night. Crickets heard outside along with the call of an owl. The moonlight shines brightly into the room, illuminating it more than even the few lamps do. EZRA is laying in a hospital bed beside the desk, asleep. Medical equipment stands next to him, and is audibly monitoring his heartbeat. More ancient Greek memorabilia now dot the walls and surfaces of the room. A knock at the door, which goes unanswered. Another knock that also goes unanswered. Finally, the door creaks open and moonlight floods the hallway. A silhouette appears in the moonlight and walks quietly and cautiously into frame. It's OWEN, and he stares for a moment into the study before he drops his bag at the doors and steps in.)

OWEN

Awake, dad? Can you hear me?

(There is no response. After a moment, OWEN turns on a lamp in the corner of the room and sits, staring intently at his ailing father.)

OWEN

Right. Well, then. After all that... you end up here. Karma, eh?

(OWEN gets up and goes his father's hospital bed, but he is afraid to touch him. Instead, OWEN just stands over him. Then, OLIVIA appears in the hall.)

OLIVIA (startled)

Jesus Christ! Owen. When did you--how...?

(OLIVIA sighs. OWEN acknowledges her presence, glances back at his father, and then, with a slight smile, moves to OLIVIA.)

OWEN

Sorry. Just never seen the old man like... well, like this.

OLIVIA

I hope you didn't wake him--I hope *I* didn't wake him.

OWEN

No, he's out.

OLIVIA (putting a hand on him)

It's good to see you.

OWEN

Surreal, isn't it?

(Beat.)

OLIVIA

Are you hungry? Did you eat on the flight here?

OWEN (snapping out of it)

No. But that's okay--I couldn't stomach anything now anyway.

OLIVIA

Owen, you should eat / something--

OWEN

I'm okay. Thank you, though. Feels good to have someone care for once. Where's mom?

(OWEN goes to leave the room, but OLIVIA gets in his way.)

OLIVIA

Owen... There's something you need to know.

OWEN

What?

OLIVIA

It's about mom. She's... well I've never seen her this bad.

OWEN

Bad? What do you mean "bad"?

OLIVIA

She nearly killed dad the other day. She knew he was sick and she just kept pushing and pushing. I think she *wanted* him to--

OWEN

Liv, that's ridiculous. He may not have treated her the best these past few years, but she's not-- she wouldn't do that.

OLIVIA

I'm telling you, Owen, she didn't even try to help him when he went down.

OWEN

Because she was in shock, Liv! How can you judge her for--

OLIVIA

Shh!

(Silence. EZRA shifts slightly, but remains asleep. After a moment.)

OWEN

You need to get that out of your head, Liv. Everyone's under a lot of stress right now--it's not an easy time for any of us.

OLIVIA

And how are you? Dad made it sound like you were--

OWEN

I'm fine. I'm home. Don't worry about me.

OLIVIA

I'm glad you're home. I've missed you.

(OWEN looks at OLIVIA, cracks a slight smile. Then, from up the stairs:)

KRIS

Olivia? Is that you?

(KRIS comes into frame, and upon seeing OWEN, rushes to him. As she comes down the stairs, we can see she is holding a vial, which she tucks into her pocket or other clothing. She embraces OWEN. It's a tender moment for all but OLIVIA.)

KRIS (CONT'D)

Oh, my baby! Owen! You didn't--you should've called! We would've waited up!

ORIN

It's okay, mom. Didn't want to wake you all up just for me.

KRIS

Well, you should have. We would've put out the welcome home signs.

OWEN

It's Afghanistan I'm coming home from, mom, not MIT.

KRIS

Well, regardless. We're excited you're back.

ORIN (weakly)

Me too.

KRIS (rather loudly)

And I assume you've seen your father?

OLIVIA

We were just trying to keep it down, actually.

KRIS

Hm. Well, you both best get upstairs and back to bed--it's nearly three in the morning!

OLIVIA

Well--

OWEN

Actually, I think I'll take a few minutes more here in the study. With dad.

KRIS

Are you sure, honey? I think you should get to bed after the trip you've had.

OWEN

I know, I just... Five minutes, is all.

KRIS

Okay. Whatever you say. I'm so happy you're back safe and sound.

OWEN

Thanks, Mom. Me too.

KRIS

I'll see you in the morning.

(KRIS begins ascending the stairs, while OLIVIA rushes to OWEN, and whispers.)

OLIVIA

Did you see?? How she didn't even try to be quiet for dad? She doesn't care at all--she wants him like this!

OWEN

Olivia, don't be ridiculous. She's tired, it's late, I'm sure she just forgot herself. She's excited I'm back.

OLIVIA

Sure, but--Owen--

OWEN

Liv. Drop it. Now. Please. Just for tonight?

(OLIVIA huffs, relents.)

OLIVIA

Fine. But be careful what you take at face value around here, okay? I'm telling you, something's off.

OWEN

If I say okay, will you go upstairs?

OLIVIA

Yes.

OWEN

Okay, then.

KRIS (O.S.)

Olivia?

OLIVIA

Thank you. Goodnight, Owen.

OWEN

'Night.

(OLIVIA ascends the stairs as well, and she can be heard closing her door. OWEN stands in the center of the room, observing his father, but also begins to notice the paintings. He is drawn to the one of ORIN MANNON that resembles him, as well as the one of EZRA I. EZRA II shifts, awakens. He speaks feebly.)

EZRA II

Son?

(Beat.)

OWEN

Dad.

EZRA II

So you made it.

OWEN

In one piece, yes.

EZRA II

Good.

(Silence.)

EZRA II (CONT'D)

'Suppose you heard about my accident.

OWEN

Stroke, they said.

EZRA II

That's what they say.

OWEN

Prognosis?

EZRA II (scoffing)

Doctors. What do they know, anyway? I'll be up and about in three days max, I guarantee it.

OWEN (distant)

That's good.

(OWEN is entranced by the portraits. A beat.)

EZRA II

You know, I'm mighty proud of you, Owen. The things you did for us, for the country--braver than the best of them. You deserve the recognition.

OWEN

Do you ever think about it?

EZRA II

About what?

OWEN

All the people. That we killed over there. Just like us.

EZRA II

They weren't like us, Owen. They were--

OWEN

Don't. Don't say that--

EZRA II

Well, they were, Owen. Those people over there were animals. They deserved what they got. And they should still be getting it, in my opinion.

OWEN

I have dreams, now, dad. Nightmares. I wake up screaming. Woken by screaming.

EZRA II

First tour. You'll get over it.

OWEN

Will I.

EZRA II

What are you complaining about? It's over and done with now! You did your time and you did it well. Exceptionally well.

OWEN

Yes, I killed exceptionally well.

EZRA II

Something wrong with that? It was your job, after all.

(Beat. OWEN is beginning to breathe heavily.)

OWEN

I still see him.

EZRA II

Him?

OWEN

Yeah. Young guy. Afghan. 43 days. 43 days ago, and I still see his face on the inside of my eyelids. And I see him in other people, too.

EZRA II

What are you on about?

OWEN

He begged, dad. In his final moments, he begged me to help him. The man that had just put a bullet in his chest and his leg and his shoulder--and he begged me to help him. He thought that I was a good man. An honorable man--that would see him in pain and see his humanity and help him.

EZRA II

Did you?

OWEN

This was during the raid. He sat there like a wounded deer, next to the pile of bodies I'd just accumulated. And I couldn't leave him--ordered not to, even if I wanted to. And I was fresh out of bullets. Do you know what sound a person makes as they asphyxiate? The gargling--you can sense the desperation. He wanted life so much. I took it from him and I don't even know who he was. Three minutes and twenty seconds it took him to die. Longest three and a half minutes of my life. And at the end? When he was just another lifeless corpse? I swear his face looked just like mine. They all did--the others in the pile. They were all me--all looked like me. And that's when I realized that war was just murdering the same man over and over and over, and in the end I would discover that those men were me. They all were me! Their faces keep coming back to me--in dreams, in night terrors--but their faces change, they start to look like mine--like I'm looking right in a mirror and strangling myself! And sometimes they begin to look like your face. What does that mean, dad?

(No answer from EZRA II.)

OWEN (CONT'D)

And the worst part is that I can't empathize. I try--I know I should, even though you believe we shouldn't. But I want to and I can't. He could see my humanity even as I squeezed the last bit of life out of him, but I can't see his, not even now. 43 days since then. I think something is wrong with me--I really do.

EZRA II

Do you always whine like this?

OWEN

I--

EZRA II

Why can't you just act like the man I made you? The man all us Mannon's made you.

OWEN

Made me?

EZRA II

Go to bed, Owen. We're done having this conversation. You're fine.

(Beat.)

OWEN

You're right. I'm fine. Goodnight.

(But EZRA II is already asleep again. OWEN turns out the lights, and ascends the stairs, leaving his military bag in the study. We hear his door shut, and then another one open. After a moment, KRIS descends the stairs and enters the study. She stands over EZRA II, and looks up at the Mannon portraits around the room. They watch her, too. KRIS breathes deeply, and then produces a vial from her clothing. She takes an IV already attached to EZRA II, and pumps the contents of the vial into his veins. EZRA II begins to convulse. Sharp lighting shift: KRIS is CLYTEMNESTRA now, and speaks directly to the audience. EZRA continues to convulse while KRIS speaks.)

KRIS (as CLYTEMNESTRA)

The thing stands so,
Rejoice or not, I vaunt and praise the deed,
And well I ween, if seemly it could be,
'Twere not ill done to pour libations here,
Justly--ay, more than justly--on his corpse
Who filled his home with curses as with wine,
And thus returned to drain the cup he filled.

(Sharp light shift. KRIS is no longer CLYTEMNESTRA. EZRA begins to shriek. He is awake, which was not supposed to happen. As the shrieking continues, KRIS hides what she can of the evidence of her act and begins to shriek alongside EZRA II. They wail. Then, OLIVIA rushes down the stairs and into the study.)

OLIVIA

What's wrong?! What's happening?!

(KRIS continues to wail.)

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

MOM!! WHAT'S GOING ON!! DO SOMETHING!!

(Ezra begins to flatline. He also begins gasping. As he does, he lifts up the vial that KRIS has forgotten to hide, which KRIS takes from him immediately and stashes. EZRA II begins pointing at KRIS and trying to speak the word "her".)

KRIS

I don't know--I--I just came down here same as you and he was shaking--

OLIVIA

What, dad? What?!

(EZRA II flatlines, and his hand falls. Right before he does, he manages to get the word "her" out one last time.)

OLIVIA

Dad!

(OWEN slowly comes down the stairs and observes the scene. OLIVIA is crying beside the hospital bed, while KRIS stands to the side.)

OWEN (quietly)

What's going on?

(OLIVIA continues sobbing by the hospital bed. KRIS goes to OWEN.)

KRIS

Let's go upstairs, honey. Your father--well, he--

OLIVIA

He's dead.

OWEN

Dead? How? I just--

KRIS

Let's discuss it another time, let's all go upstairs--

OLIVIA (to KRIS)

What did you do?

KRIS

What? What did I...?

OLIVIA

I saw him--heard him--he pointed at you! What did you do?

KRIS (beginning to cry)

I... I...

OLIVIA

WHAT DID YOU DO?!

OWEN

Liv, stop!

OLIVIA

How can't you see it? How?

OWEN

I can see clearer than you can. I saw what he'd become--

OLIVIA

What he'd become?!

OWEN

What I'd become! What he made me! What all the Mannons made me!

(OWEN makes a sweeping motion to the portraits all around the room.)

KRIS (still sobbing)

Owen, what's wrong?

OWEN

It's us, can't you see? It's the Mannon men--bringing death and destruction wherever they go! He did--and now I surely do! We are war and killing and slaughter and we've brought it back to this house--we've come back to infect the whole of us--they know it and I know it. I know it now!

(OWEN goes to his military bag and retrieves a firearm. Sharp light shift as he goes to point it at his head and, as he does, OLIVIA tackles him.)

OWEN (as ORESTES)

My father's fate ordains this doom for me.

OLIVIA

OWEN, NO!

(KRIS screams, OLIVIA gets to OWEN and the lights abruptly go out as the weapon fires. More screams. Blackout.)

Within the above excerpt, all three primary tenets of dramatic recontextualization can be observed. The opening stage directions, for example, note that there is ancient Greek artifacts and memorabilia scattered throughout the Mannon study, which is a trend that begins earlier in the play and continues through the final scenes; this is one of the most prominent instances of sedimented time throughout the script. In addition, this juxtaposition of contemporary medical equipment and office supplies, American Civil War era décor, and ancient Greek tchotchkes elevates the excerpt's usage of sedimented time to another level. In addition to, and in conjunction with, sedimented time, the above excerpt contains multiple instances of ghosting. The setting of the Mannon house is, of course, the most obvious of these instances of ghosting, but the addition of characters from (in this specific scene) Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and also Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* provide further ghosting of productions long past. The text itself is infused with both the languages of Aeschylus and O'Neill, while managing to find a tone and voice of its own. Furthermore, in sections of script that I have not included above, ghostly visages of both O'Neill and Aeschylus characters appear silently throughout the play. One example of this concerns the visage of Orin Mannon that appears in an earlier scene where Olivia is examining the portraiture of the study in depth. Speaking of which, another example of sedimented time and ghosting within the script is the constant, living gaze of the Mannon portraits that dot the walls of the study. These portraits play a major role later in the script, when Olivia and Orin truly begin to deteriorate before the conclusion of the narrative. The presence of and judgement sprouting from the Mannon lineage of these portraits is palpable to the contemporary characters, and influences the play in much the same way that O'Neill's notion of family fate influences *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

The third and final tenet of dramatic recontextualization, the shifting of the source material's gaze, is also present within even this snippet of script. As aforementioned in the section detailing the playwright's homework, I purposefully shifted the gaze of this recontextualization away from O'Neill's reliance on the Oedipus complex, and moved it towards the realm more focused on the horrors of war and the effect that contemporary combat has on both the individual and the family. O'Neill's notions of fate still take residence within my recontextualization, but appear primarily later in the play. Owen, though, in this scene, does indeed wrestle with the generational fate of the Mannon men, who all seem doomed to the deep loneliness that O'Neill writes about so well. In addition, I have made many changes to not only the narrative order of *Mourning Becomes Electra*, but also have intermingled references to dialogue from all throughout the play in the excerpt above. This practice is common in the rest of the script, aside from where I have done the work of setting up the individual narrative threads of the contemporary Mannon family that the play focuses on. Of further importance is the shift that occurs when considering the differences and similarities of military combat in the times of the American Civil War and the conflict in Afghanistan; while the two conflicts are extremely different, I found that there are shared human issues at the core of both, and have written the interaction between Owen and his father in the above excerpt to reflect that.

Ultimately, my recontextualization work on *Mourning Becomes Electra* has yielded a script that brings the issues that O'Neill and Aeschylus were primarily concerned with into the twenty-first century. In addition, though, my recontextualization poses those same questions that its predecessors posed with the added twist of contemporary context: what does this mean to us in this moment today? The result is an amalgamation of O'Neill, Aeschylus, and myself, that blends all of the material together in a fluid, retrospective manner.

CONCLUSION

In the coming years and decades, I hope that the processes and trends of dramatic recontextualization receive additional attention from scholars and dramatists alike. The innate value waiting to be mined from past dramatic texts is rich and fruitful, and contemporary trends in playwrighting are only now beginning to pick up on this. Writers like Branden Jacobs-Jenkins, Jackie Sibblies Drury, Jeremy O. Harris, Sarah Ruhl, and others all have made a career out of dramatic recontextualization, and continue to push the craft forward with every new work that they produce. And, while this circular utilization of theatre history is just beginning to catch on, the scripts that have been born of the process have proven to be critically popular, easily produced, and even applicable to scholarly dissection.

There are certainly more questions to be asked regarding the processes and viability of dramatic recontextualization as the phenomenon continues to grow exponentially and be further studied; some of these questions have already been posed in earlier chapters of this thesis. Those questions, though, such as the queries of authorship, ethical recycling, and effective methodology are just as important to research in the coming decades as those explored within this thesis. As these questions are further explored, though, I predict that the appeal of dramatic recontextualization will only grow in comparison to translation and traditional adaptation. It is my hope that the popularity and study of dramatic recontextualization continues to grow to the point where there are separate classes and workshops being taught on the subject across not only the United States, but the rest of the theatre-going world as well.

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