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A SERIES OF PAPERS ON THE HELLENIC DRAMA AND CONTEMPORANEITY

THE ORESTEIA, OR THE MYTH OF THE WESTERN METROPOLIS BETWEEN HABERMAS AND FOUCAULT

I. Cheerful Apollo and Athena

For some time, the following two passages, situated halfway the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus, have attracted the attention of both philologists and stage directors. They deal with the curious ways in which, in the opinion of two gods, the conception of the human takes place. Trying to convince the Furies to respect the will of Zeus, the supreme male and father, Apollo and Athena, in the vs. 658-664 and 734-740, are lecturing them about some biological aspects of the conception. A man is able to produce life all by himself, a woman is merely a temporary vessel who carries the semen:

*She who is called the child's mother is not
Its begetter, but the nurse of the newly sown conception.
The begetter is the male, and she as a stranger for a stranger 660
Preserves the offspring, if no god blights its birth;
And I shall offer you a proof of what I say.
There can be a father without a mother; near at hand
Is the witness, the child of Olympian Zeus.*

The second notorious extract is uttered by Athena and contains a complete rejection of her sex:

*It is now my office to give final judgment;
And I shall give my vote to Orestes.* 735
*For there is no mother who bore me;
And I approve the male in all things, short of accepting marriage,
With all my heart, and I belong altogether to my father.
Therefore I shall not give greater weight to the death of a woman,
One who slew her husband, the watcher of the house¹* 740

In a recent Belgian production, *Le Sang des Atrides*, a newly written adaptation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, staged by "Le Théâtre en Liberté" (Brussels, 1996), Athena could not refrain from giggling during those two passages. Daniel Scahaise, the director, who himself rewrote the whole trilogy in French, added at the end of the Exodos the following stage directions: "Laughs from Athena and Apollo", an order which both deities carried out in an extremely cheerful way. End of the most famous classical trilogy, two gods bursting into laughter!

In antiquity, philosophical, medical, biological and mythical arguments about the inferior nature of women circulated widely.² The Hippocratic corpus, Aristotle, Galen and Soranus, all "specialists" of the female body, considered the female as a "failed male". In one of his many works which tried to prove the weaker and imperfect nature of women, Aristotle cites the view put forward by Anaxagoras concerning the origin of the sex-differences, a passage which is highly reminiscent of the words of Apollo in the *Eumenides*: "the semen comes into being from the male, while the female provides the space for it".³ In the eyes of Aristotle, the female blood, coming from a weaker creature, is colder and not so pure at all, while the male semen, a residue of male blood, is hotter, and hence better concocted and better compacted: "and the more compacted semen is, the more fertile it is".⁴ On top of the oppositions male/female, hot/cold, strong/weak, able to concoct/disable to concoct, male semen is said to dispose of something more divine, in the sense

¹ Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *Aeschylus. Oresteia. Translated with notes*, London, 1979 (2), Duckworth.

² D. J. Conacher, *Aeschylus' Oresteia. A Literary Commentary*, Toronto, 1987, University of Toronto Press, p. 161 and note 58, p.185-186.

³ Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium* IV, 1, 763 b; see Aristoteles, *De Historia Animalium*, VIII, 608a -b; Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*, VII, 64-66; XXVIII 77-81.

⁴ Aristotle, *De Generatione Animalium*, IV, 1, 765b 2-7. See G.E.R. Lloyd, *Science, Folklore and Ideology. Studies in the Life Sciences in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge, 1983, Cambridge University Press, p. 95: Nevertheless females are defined by their incapacity – as males by their capacity to concoct the blood, and he (sc. Aristotle) calls the female sex a "natural deformity" (p. 95).

that it contains "the principle of movement for generated things, while the female serves as their matter".⁵ Therefore, Froma I. Zeitlin, in a very illuminating article "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*", is totally justified when she says: "The hypothesis is that semen is transmitted from the brain and the spinal column through the genitals to the womb. There is more: the major component of semen is *pneuma*, a foamlike airy substance that contains the seed of the divine. Originating in the brain, semen is responsible for endowing the offspring with the distinctive human capacity for reason, for *logos*. Seed of generation, of intellectual ability, and of the divine element in the human species, semen confirms the innate superiority of male over female".⁶

Medical science, as one of the many channels to ensure the patriarchal and thus ideological vision of man, serves here as an argument, nearly at the end of the trilogy, to justify a number of transitions which would mark the *Oresteia* forever as one of the most important turning points of Greek history: Western civilisation is finally realized by means of a triple victory: on a divine level the chthonic gives way to the Olympic, on a cultural level the barbaric to the Greek, on a social level the female to the male.⁷ Anthropology (Bachofen), marxism (Marx, Engels) and feminism (Millett, Cixous, Zeitlin) all considered the *Oresteia* as a witness to some major socio-historical events. But even apart from these kinds of interpretations, the trilogy itself proved to be one of the most important works of art ever produced by Greek consciousness. As Simon Goldhill has said: "It was a landmark from its first performance, recognized as the greatest work of a playwright who was recognized as the figurehead of the flourishing of tragedy in classical Athens. He still is. The *Oresteia* was, first of all, for the Greeks themselves simply the most influential play ever written."⁸

Against the background of this strong appreciation, the attitude of the Belgian director, Daniel Scahaise, reveals itself as rather blasphemous. How-

⁵ Mary Harlow, *In the name of the father: procreation, paternity and patriarchy*, in: Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (Ed.), *Thinking men. Masculinity and its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition*, London and New York, 1998, Routledge, p. 158-159.

⁶ Froma I. Zeitlin, *The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in Aeschylus's Oresteia*, in: *Playing the Other. Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, Chicago and London, 1996, The University of Chicago Press, p. 109.

⁷ Cf. Froma I. Zeitlin, o. c., p. 87; her conclusion is: "But the male-female conflict subsumes the other two by providing the central metaphor that "sexualizes" the other issues and attracts them into its magnetic field".

⁸ Susan Harris Smith, *Twentieth-Century Plays Using Classical Myths. A Checklist*, in: *Modern Drama XXIX*, 1986, 1, p. 125-126, collected 92 important translations and adaptations between 1892 (Claudiel's first version of the *Agamemnon*) and 1980 (John Eaton's opera, *The Cry of Clytemnestra*).

ever, as it will appear, he is not the only one to have worked out such artistic options, since a growing number of philologists, philosophers and directors ask a number of questions dealing with the deconstruction of Western knowledge in general and with the *Oresteia* in particular. This attitude is not a postmodern way of showing disrespect for the tradition, on the contrary, it can be considered as a necessary operation leading to useful knowledge for present-day generations. As the *Oresteia* is conceived as the Athenian version of the foundation of the Greek (metro)polis, it must be seen as a mental construction which, for 2,500 years, has functioned in the most various ways to create and protect large areas of Western identity. Nevertheless, it is good to remember that it is only a piece of construction and that, as such, it went through a lot of metamorphoses. To put it in an extreme form, as Camille Paglia did, one could say that Aeschylus, in order to glorify the city of Athens, transplanted a Homeric myth into his own city, which in the epic world of the *Ilias*, was just a hamlet and, in doing this, he resembled a modern American poet who would situate the legend of the Nights of the Round Table in New York.⁹

In the eyes of the great public, undermining the sacrosanct image of the greatest of all tragedies, certainly provokes a shock effect. On the other hand, this gesture is a deliberate artistic statement and one can always compare it to former ones, which in their days also seemed incomprehensible at first sight, like Marcel Duchamp's remake of the Mona Lisa (*LHOOQ*, 1919) or James Joyce's rewriting of the *Ulysses* (1922). Before discussing the value of Daniel Scahaïse's interpretation, let us first have a look at the remarkable career of the *Oresteia*.

II. Approval and disapproval

Our age likes to consider Aeschylus (and Shakespeare) as our contemporary.¹⁰ A great number of editions, translations and performances of his dramatic works testify to this preference. The last twenty years, no less than six really outstanding productions of the *Oresteia*, among a dozen others, could be seen all over Europe.

The television production made by Kenneth McLeish in 1979, called *The Serpent Son*, featuring Diana Rigg as Clytemnestra, had a worldwide success and proved that an Aeschylean topic still could fascinate the great public.

⁹ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertite to Emily Dickinson*, London, 1990, Penguin Books.

¹⁰ Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 1961; for some striking parallels between *The Oresteia* and *Macbeth*, see: Adrian Poole, *Tragedy. Shakespeare and the Greek Example*, Oxford, 1987, Basil Blackwell, Chapter 2. "The Initiate fear": Aeschylus, Shakespeare, p. 15-53.

In 1980, Peter Stein staged his version of the *Oresteia* in the Berliner Schaubühne am Halleschen Ufer with the magnificent Edith Clever as Clytemnestra. Stein paid particular attention to the Greek text (he staged a prose version of it, unaccompanied by music) and chose a diachronic design concept, which gave him the opportunity to commingle a number of styles and registers. Some slight political allusions pointed at the German socio-political situation of the moment.

The version made by Karolos Koun (1980-1) shared the preoccupations of Stein concerning the text. Koun was very interested in the original text and tried to revive it using the chorus as a prime means of expression. Masks and primitive costumes, as well as the very expressive acting of Melina Mercouri as Clytemnestra, helped to create a primaeval world, loaded with nightmares and threatening, a wonderful spectacle as it was staged in the open air theatre of Epidauros.¹¹

In the summer of 1982, Peter Hall presented the version he made with the London National Theatre (1981) in Epidauros. Once again, language stood at the centre of attention, since the poet Tony Harrison had written a very peculiar translation, based upon alliteration and assonance, and referring to the old-English way of speaking. The staccato rhythm and the overwhelming force of the diction made it a very strong esthetic experience, though not really interesting in an emotional and existential way.¹²

In the interpretation of his *Klytāimnestra* (1983), the Japanese director Tadashi Suzuki stressed the importance of body language, masks and choreography in order to liberate the emotions. The old traditions of No and Kabuki theatre were used to realize the transition to the old mythic past, heroic in the eyes of the East and the West, a time when humans still felt the need for living together. Theatre for Suzuki meant in the first place the occasion for the actor to express himself and his body in a creative way, not the obligation to impersonate a given text. Relying on timeless motions, his theatre focused upon the emptiness of life of the modern Clytemnestra, who gradually lost grip on her family and its ancient values.

Concern for other cultures also characterized the production *Les Atrides* by Ariane Mnouchkine (1990-1993). Consciousness of a multicultural world, loss of the kind of realism which turned up in so many European productions, a special care for movement and music and a new sensitivity to the position of

¹¹ John Chioles, *The Oresteia and the Avant-garde. Three Decades of Discourse*, in: *Performing Arts Journal* XLV, 1993, 3, p. 24-25.

¹² John Chioles, o. c., p. 16-22; Jan Maarten Bremer, *Drie opvoeringen van Aeschylus' Oresteia kritisch beschouwd*, in: *Lampas* XVI, 1983, 3, p. 131-154.

women in tragedy made this production one of the highlights of twentieth century adaptation of the Greek classics.

This number of really superb productions of the *Oresteia* gave the trilogy a place among the most important artistic and cultural manifestations of the end of the twentieth century. Our society clearly recognizes itself in a number of aspects in this trilogy which, in the meantime, has reached the respectable age of 2,500 years. Nevertheless, the esteem that it enjoys today can never obliterate the lack of appreciation it had to endure for more than 2000 years. To be sure, in Antiquity, the tragedies of Aeschylus knew an important and successful career, but during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, he clearly was not held in high respect. The first translations of his dramatic works were not published before the end of the 18th century. Since his theatre did not at all respect the rules made by Aristotle, it was rejected in a society which cared more for the rules of *vraisemblance* and *bienséance* than for real emotions and which could not appreciate the grandiose lifestyle and diction of his characters. Even for Voltaire, Aeschylus was a barbarian.¹³ He was the last of the Greek tragedians to be recognized in the 19th century, the period in which romanticism¹⁴ stimulated the search for the distant past. He was not even staged during the German Neohellenism, when (some version of romantic) Greece captured the German imagination and so deeply influenced the education system. His *Oresteia* was only discovered in the midst of the nineteenth century (1847) by Richard Wagner who used it as a source of inspiration for *Der Ring des Nibelungen* (1853-74).

This outline of extreme approval and disapproval should make us attentive to the ideological deep structures that seem to govern some periods. In order to have a clear vision about the reasons which incited Apollo and Athena to laugh A. D. 1996, we have to situate the play in the whole of the twentieth century, remembering the great epistemological shifts we have passed through. As Thomas Kuhn, a philosopher of science, made us realize, each of them assumes the character of a "paradigm", a selection of problems and presuppositions which enable us to look at things, but which, on the other hand, make us deliberately blind concerning other things which do not match our prime interest.¹⁵ Three paradigmatic schemes which commanded the production of the *Oresteia* in the 19th and 20th centuries are now briefly analysed.

¹³ Siegfried Melchinger, Aischylos auf der Bühne der Neuzeit, in: Hildebrecht Hommel (Hrsg.), Wege zu Aischylos, Darmstadt, 1974, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, I, p. 443-475.

¹⁴ Melchinger, o. c., p. 449 mentions the adaptation by Diderot (1757) and its translation by Lessing (1769) as the first signs of a positive reception.

¹⁵ Thomas Kuhn, The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Chicago, 1962, The University of Chicago.

III. Romanticism, Neoclassicism, Modernism

Romanticism

Looking back at the history of the classics in the 19th centuries, one has to realize that classical art and literature were estimated in totally different ways. First of all, classics became part of that all embracing hypothesis, called romanticism. Nearly all the "classical" authors were analysed in their use of romantic themes and the three great tragedians did not escape this kind of mental investigation.¹⁶

An outstanding adept of German Romanticism, Richard Wagner (1813-1883) created with his *Ring* a "Gesamtkunstwerk", which had to testify to the tragic spirit and had to deal with the history of gods, heroes and men. In his autobiography, he wrote: "I could see the *Oresteia* with my mind's eye, as though it were actually being performed and its effect on me was indescribable. Nothing could equal the sublime emotion with which the *Agamemnon* inspired me, and to the last word of the *Eumenides*, I remained in an atmosphere so far removed from the present day that I have never since been really able to reconcile myself with modern literature. My ideas about the whole significance of drama and the theatre were no doubt moulded by these impressions".¹⁷ Nowadays, of course, we can easily say that Wagner's aim to dedicate his "Gesamtkunstwerk" to the whole population and to give it a function in the special cultic atmosphere of the Bayreuth festival, clearly is a nineteenth century nostalgic souvenir of the distant past, but, as Simon Goldhill remarks, Schlegel too shared this almost blind admiration for Aeschylus, saying that "in his almost superhuman greatness he is likely to remain unexcelled".¹⁸

The many influences which constituted the German Philhellenic nineteenth century are not easy to disentangle. A great number of philosophers

¹⁶ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, London, 1953; W. J. Bate, *From Classic to Romantic*, Cambridge, 1946. In classical philology, interest in the romantic nature of some classical authors revealed itself throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Cf. B. Ogle Marbury, *Romantic Movements in Antiquity*, in: *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, LXXIV, 1943, p. 1-18; p. 3: "To this sentimental attitude toward nature, Gilbert Murray has added the sentimental attitude towards women and has made these two elements the chief ingredients in what he describes as "that something which in a large sense may be called the Romantic Movement". It is somewhat confusing, however, to find Aeschylus called "The Romantic Aeschylus" because his plays are awe-inspiring, picturesque, spectacular, vigorous, to find both him and Sophocles described as "romantic" as concerns the heroic saga in contrast to Euripides who is the apostle of enlightenment, and to read a refutation of this last view on the ground that the characters in Euripides' plays are "romantic" because he portrays men as "they ought to be". Cf. N. I. Herescu, *Catulle et le Romantisme*, in: *Latomus* XVI, 1957, p. 433-445.

¹⁷ Simon Goldhill, *Aeschylus. The Oresteia*, Cambridge, 1992, Cambridge University Press, p. 96.

¹⁸ Simon Goldhill, *Aeschylus*, o. c., p. 97.

who affected the intellectual life profoundly (Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche) wrote about the tragic experience in a way which made romanticism end in philosophical idealism. Most of them founded their theory on the principle of dialectics which continuously sought a way to unite the concrete (work of art) with the abstract (Unity, Transcendence, der Geist). In their eyes, the history of mankind can be seen as a permanent transition towards the new, a gradual process of becoming der Geist. Since this entails a dynamic system of opposites wanting to destroy each other, human action on the ethic level was interpreted as an opposition between the Law of Nature and the Law of the City, and thus in terms of an opposition between the Male and the Female. In the opinion of Hegel, man incorporated the order of the city, woman the order of nature or family. Since in tragedy, man constantly tried to triumph over his limitations, every one of his actions was finally meant to change his situation. German Romanticism and Idealism thus created a particular atmosphere, in which the male and female, the Apollonian and Dionysian, the tragic and the untragic, acquired totally new meanings which never were present in fifth century Athens. As a consequence, Antigone and Creon, Athena and the Furies, were interpreted in terms of philosophical categories which would influence all later productions. From this moment on, every regular twentieth century interpretation was touched by the idea that, in every Greek tragedy, oppositional values should result in some kind of synthesis (which can only be said of a third of all tragedies, thus turning the others into non-tragedies). The *Eumenides*, already characterized by the inferior position of woman since the patriarchal fifth century, saw this inferiority doubled through the impact of German idealistic philosophy.¹⁹

Neoclassicism

The beginning of the twentieth century was important, because it saw the translations of Ulrich von Wilamowitz, Gilbert Murray and Paul Mazon, masterpieces of precision and scholarship, which could be read and understood by a large public.²⁰ The main event in the career of the *Oresteia* has been its staging in 1900, based on the translation of Ulrich von Wilamowitz. The year 1900 is to be situated in the period in which the "Wiener Sezession",²¹ Puvis de Chavannes or Ferdinand Khnopff presented their classicistic paintings

¹⁹ Not only literature and philosophy were influenced by romanticism, also anthropology and historiography shared this hypothesis. The revolutionary book by Bachofen on matriarchy, deeply marked by romantic feelings (*Das Mutterrecht*, 1861) was countered by Wilamowitz, who based his researches on historical positivism.

²⁰ S. Melchinger, o. c., p. 461.

²¹ Carl Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, New York, 1961, Alfred A. Knopf, 1961. Chapter V

pervaded by aspects of romanticism, idealism, utopianism and symbolism, works of art which clearly rejected the classical realist tradition. In less than one decade, between 1890 and 1898, Gustav Klimt produced three images of Athena, the female warrior who seemed to deny the very kinds of femininity which his age was so fond of.²² Though neoclassicism in architecture, painting and sculpture dominated the 18th century and was beyond its apogee around 1900, and though painters around this date developed a more subjective and irrational desire for the female through mythological motives, the staging of Greek tragedies knew a revival in exactly the same years in the ancient style and in classical Greek pronunciation. The Oxford production of the *Agamemnon* in 1880 was the first attempt at staging a Greek tragedy in the original language in England. Soon afterwards, others followed this kind of neoclassicist style (Cambridge, 1882, Sophocles' *Ajax*, in the original Greek; Sydney, *Agamemnon* in 1886), and, as Fiona Macintosh specifies, "(t)he early Cambridge productions were closely associated with the study of classical archaeology, and so extreme care and attention were devoted to the construction of the sets".²³

The staging in 1900 of the *Oresteia* by the "Akademische Verein für Kunst und Literatur" in Berlin was neoclassicist in a number of ways. As was the case for the staging of the early Cambridge productions, a great number of external sets like costumes and weapons, as well as the overall scenic design (Doric doors, even with a couple of lions worked into one of them) were submitted to the critical judgment of classical philologists. However, the 1900 production was of a pseudo-archeological solidity and of a flat realism, without much poetic and religious depth, but with impressively large choruses and grandiose movements. Wilamowitz, who knew too well that Aeschylus was really unknown as an artist, and who realized that the work itself could not raise great expectations, really wanted to inspire new life to Greek tragedy. Still, the result of Hans Oberländer's direction could not satisfy him completely. Anyhow, it is important to see that at that time philologists and directors worked closely together to adapt a Greek tragedy to the needs of a new period²⁴. In a society where positivism was the main source for the development of the human sciences, theatre had to go through a phase of philological faithfulness and historicising realism.

²² Gustav Klimt: *Athena*, Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1890-1891; *Theseus*, Poster for the first Exhibition of the Sezession, with Athena; *Pallas Athena*, 1898.

²³ Fiona Macintosh, Tragedy in performance: nineteenth- and twentieth-century productions, in: P. E. Easterling, *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1997, Cambridge University Press, p. 292.

²⁴ Hellmut Flashar, *Inszenierung der Antike. Das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit 1585-1990*, München, 1991, p. 340 note 6; p. 111-123.

The staging of the *Oresteia* by Max Reinhardt²⁵ in 1911 took place on a scene with cyclopic walls which suggested Mycenaean times. His choruses were conducted by 27 soloists and stuffed with masses of more than 500 walk-on actors. In order to realize the old dream of maximum participation by the public, Reinhardt installed a huge stage in the middle of a circus,²⁶ but the monumentality of the scene reduced the actors to insignificant dwarfs.

Still, the two stagings of the *Oresteia* in which Max Reinhardt had a part (in the 1900 production as an actor, in the next one as a director) meant a great progression compared to the purely classicist performances. The one made by Sergei Ivanovich Tanayev in 1887-94, was of a "lucid and harmonically conservative idiom, in beautifully controlled and accomplished lyrical tableaux". As Burian says: "The result was a kind of dramatic pageant, statuesque in its mythic impersonality, a reassertion of classical measure in the face of late romantic excess".²⁷

Modernism

During the 20th century, the staging of classical tragedies was influenced by other sensibilities. In general terms, it depended on the reaction of the fully individualized subject which lost touch with the framework of philosophical and religious reference. Hence a psychological reading of the literary canon and a translation of the general and the abstract into the concrete and the individual. General politics was reduced into the fortunes of the lonely man, mythical leaders of the past hidden under twentieth century common names. As a philosophical and existential category outside and beyond Christianity,²⁸ classical tragedy helped modern man to look for his roots in the pagan tradition, and this search for hidden symbols and truths resulted in a century full of ritual performances.

One of the possibilities for modernism to rewrite the history of man was psychoanalysis. Eugene O'Neill, in his *Mourning becomes Electra* (1931) used the classical framework of the *Oresteia* to criticise the puritan morality of American society after the Civil War; in this secularized world, there was no place for a classicist image of Athena and the Furies, and Lavinia turned out to be her own Fury and judge. T. S. Eliot, in his verse drama *The Family*

²⁵ J. Chioles, The *Oresteia* and the Avant-Garde. Three Decades of Discourse, in: *Performing Arts Journal* XLV, 1993, 3, p. 2; S. Melchinger, o. c., p. 447.

²⁶ Staged in 1911 without the *Eumenides*.

²⁷ Peter Burian, Tragedy adapted for stages and screens: the Renaissance to the present, in: P. E. Easterling (Ed.), o. c., p. 267.

²⁸ What to think of the Christianized version by Paul Claudel (1891-92), in which Athena appeared as the Immaculate Conception, Apollo as the Guardian Angel of God, and the Areopagus as the New Holy Church, see Melchinger, o. c., p. 464, note 50.

Reunion (1939), explicitly singled out the motive of the Furies, but finally used them to translate neuroses into the history of a personal and Christianlike saving. In Sartre's *Les Mouches* (1943), staged during the occupation of Paris, analysis of the family ties was abandoned for a philosophical discussion of the way modern man could dispose of a personal freedom.²⁹

A number of interpretations was clearly political. Lothar Mützel (1936) directed the Nazi production in 1936 during the Olympic Games in Berlin; in his version, the final discussion in the *Eumenides* dealt with the struggle between Aryans and Untermenschen³⁰. In the Berlin production of 1962 (held at the Berlin Volksbühne) by Erwin Piscator, a disciple of Max Reinhardt, the destruction of Dresden and the military madness of the war served as modern parallels. Piscator was the first to stage the cycle of the four tragedies written by Gerhart Hauptmann between 1940-1944 in one and the same production.³¹

The best known ritual performance is certainly the one made by Luca Ronconi in 1972. His trilogy was staged in three different styles, ranging from the archaic to the modern, and dealt with the question how far rituals were definitely lost in a modern society. In Hauptmann's *Atriden-Tetralogie*,³² archaic ritual was present to testify to the massacres of the two world wars: it struck him that people apparently never learn and always try to cover up their foolishness through the making of stories about civilisation. In 1955, Louis Barrault used masks and led his actors to a situation of total depersonalisation.³³ Gordon Craig, the English counterpart of Max Reinhardt, in his version of the *Oresteia*, introduced a sophisticated choreography by dancers of the "Ballets Russes"; he was the first director to combine the effects of timeless masks and highly stylised movements.³⁴

²⁹ Peter Burian, Tragedy adapted for stages and screens: the Renaissance to the present, in: P. E. Easterling (Ed.), o. c., discusses O'Neill, Eliot and Sartre (Orestes and Electra in the Twentieth Century, p. 254-261).

³⁰ Fiona Macintosh, Tragedy in performance: nineteenth- and twentieth-century productions, in: P. E. Easterling (Ed.), o. c., p. 308.

³¹ S. Melchinger, o. c., p. 468.

³² Hauptmann wrote his *Atriden-Tetralogie* between 1940-1944. Their opening performances took place as follows: *Iphigenie in Aulis*, 1943, Wiener Burgtheater, *Agamemnon's Tod* and *Elektra*, 1947, am Deutschen Theater, Berlin; *Iphigenie in Delphi*, 1941, Staatlichen Schauspielhaus, Berlin. Cf. Georg Hensel, Spielplan. Der Schauspielführer von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart. Band II, München, 1992, Südwest Verlag, p. 752: "Hauptmanns Entsetzen vor dem Grauen der Hitlerdiktatur und des Krieges ist Gewiss in seine Tetralogie eingegangen (...). Hauptmanns archaische Gestalten handeln unter dem Zwang eines undurchschaubaren Schicksals; sie sind für ihre Taten, einschliesslich ihrer Greuel, im Sinne einer modernen politischen Ethik nicht verantwortlich".

³³ S. Melchinger, o. c., p. 472.

³⁴ Macintosh, o. c., p. 305; Melchinger, o. c., p. 465.

To conclude, one could say that a great number of intellectual and scenic presuppositions changed thoroughly in each of the three great paradigms. In staging the *Oresteia*, directors were largely determined in their choices of text and image, sound and movement by some deep-seated factors which reflected problems ruling the society of that moment. In the 1920's it is not only too soon, but theoretically impossible to find intercultural stagings, feminist readings or attempts at deconstruction. The history of the production of the *Oresteia* reveals changing attitudes towards Greek tragedy in general and towards this trilogy in particular.

IV. Deconstruction, Feminism and Postmodernism

Modernist interpretations of the *Oresteia*, no matter how different individual stagings may be, never changed the basic outlines of the story. Ronconi and Piscator, O'Neill and Barrault interpreted in a personal way political backgrounds or mythical and archaic deep structures, but did not question the validity of it as a founding story. Neither did the productions made by Karlos Koun, Peter Hall or Peter Stein, which upheld very much the value of the original text. The *Oresteia* staged by Peter Hall has been called "perfectly executed British theatre".³⁵ Peter Stein was considered "one of the masters in didactic theatre".³⁶ All these productions had in common a respect for the text and for the kind of imagination it presents, irrespective of how different the national interpretations may have been.

Still, the last decades also saw the birth of another kind of criticism, which dealt as well with ideological and hermeneutic aspects of the *Oresteia* itself as with the changed socio-political and spiritual conditions of Western civilisation. Symptomatic of this changed methodological awareness are studies like the one by J. J. Winkler *The Constraints of Desire. The Anthropology of Sex and Gender in Ancient Greece* (1990) or the two studies by Lin Foxhall and John Salmon, *Thinking Men. Masculinity and its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition* (1998) and *When Men were Men: Masculinity, Power and Identity in Classical Antiquity* (1998).

Eurocentrism

A first kind of criticism concerns questions dealing with universalism and Eurocentrism. When we consider the reception met by the Peter Stein version in Moscow, we are getting to the core of the problem: the Russian public got the idea of being slightly provoked and could not fail to notice a certain kind

³⁵ Chioles, o. c., p. 17.

³⁶ Chioles, o. c., p. 21-23.

of Western pride in selling the Western version of the birth of democracy to a former communist state. In his *Notes for an African Oresteia* (*Appunti per un Orestide africano*, 1969) Pier Paolo Pasolini had already formulated other remarks concerning the Eurocentric approach in this trilogy. He doubted for instance whether Greek drama as a typically Western invention was really made of universal themes. Other cultures, he suggested, knew the same or comparable rituals and themes in their artistic productions, such as filial piety, revenge and the effects of fate.

In general, one can say that questions about interculturalism gradually became more important from the beginning of the twentieth century and that all over the world many directors, for different reasons, staged multiculturalist or interculturalist productions. Since the end of World War II, there has been a strong Japanese interest in Greek tragedies, and vice versa, Western directors turned to the East in search of new models of wisdom and artistic inspiration (Artaud, Brook, Grotowski).

Modernism was the artistic expression of the shaken confidence of a whole continent in its processes of signifying. It also made people aware of their own mental habits of thinking and interpreting. Only gradually, Western artists became acquainted with other cultures (André Breton, Max Ernst) and other artistic concepts (cf. the fascination of Antonin Artaud with the Cambodian dance spectacle in 1922, held in front of the reconstructed Angkor temple in Marseille, and also with the Balinese Dance at the Colonial Exposition of Paris in 1931) and could accept the logocentric limitations of Western theatre.

In his article *Dear Sir Peter...: An Open Letter to Peter Hall*, David Wiles explicitly mentions this awareness: "Hall subscribes to a formalism that is Eurocentric and ideologically laden, eliminating politics and religion from a production that purports to be universal". Comparing Hall to major continental directors like Stein, Mnouchkine and Purcarete, Wiles suggested that Hall's logocentricity is distinctively British, a product of the Shakespeare inheritance.³⁷

Especially in the last decades of this century, a number of disciplines have faced the question of Eurocentrism in classical Greek tragedy more directly: the science of literature, anthropology and cultural poetics examine now to what extent tragedy both as a philosophical concept and as an artistic construction express European thought. Only now, the study of universalism and

³⁷ David Wiles, *Dear Sir Peter...: An Open Letter to Sir Peter Hall*. Paper presented at the International Theatre Conference, Thessaloniki, 1997, (Dis) Placing Classical Greek Theatre.

particularism, nationalism and transculturalism seems to have liberated itself from older romantic categories.³⁸

Thanks to a great number of international festivals, we know the stagings of the Spanish director Tavola, the Japanese interpretations of Tadashi Suzuki and Yukia Ninagawa, the American ones of Peter Sellars and Lee Breuer, the experiences of Spiros Vrachotitis in India,³⁹ the Yoruba interpretations by Wole Soyinka and Ola Rotimi,⁴⁰ etc.

Often we see that interculturalism means or implies a settlement of old accounts. Marianne McDonald, in her very stimulating book *Ancient Sun, Modern Light. Greek Drama on the Modern Stage*, gives an overview of Suzuki's plays and says: "In *The Trojan Women* we see the devastation that America has visited on Japan. (...) In *The Bacchae* we see Japan in the form of Dionysus exacting vengeance on America in the guise of Pentheus".⁴¹ The *Ajax* of Peter Sellars contained severe criticism of the political leaders in his country; his staging of the *Persians*, how superficial it may be, warned them again of too much arrogance. However, criticism of national and international leaders is a strategy as old as tragedy itself; it is one of the major themes to analyse human behaviour and identity in swiftly changing times.⁴²

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, Western Europe was still convinced of the uniqueness of its identity and genius. Retracing the intellectual history of the West, Martin Bernal, in his notorious book *Black Athena* says: "At the core of *Altertumswissenschaft* was the image of the divine Greek, both artistic and philosophical. Greeks also had – like the idealized image of the Germans themselves – to be integrated with their native soil, and pure". For a number of Europeans, the idea that Egyptians and Semites could have been the birthplace of Greek culture, was an unbearable hypothesis. It was

³⁸ Dave Williams, *Greek Drama: The View from Taiwan* (with a discussion of the Oresteia presented in Taipei in October 1996 by the Contemporary Legend Theater), Paper presented in Thessaloniki at the International Theatre Conference (Dis)Placing Classical Greek Theatre, 1997.

³⁹ Spiros Vrachotitis, *My Experiences in India*, in: *Second International Symposium on Ancient Greek Drama. Tradition and Innovation*, Nicosia, 1992, p. 39-43.

⁴⁰ Femi Folorunso, *Displacement and Relocation. Classical Greek Drama in Yoruba Culture*, Paper presented at the International Theatre Conference, Thessaloniki, 1997.

⁴¹ Marianne McDonald, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light. Greek Drama on the Modern Stage*, New York, 1992, Columbia University Press, p. 14-15.

⁴² See the clear consciousness and bitterness in the adaptation by Gerhart Hauptmann, *Die Atriden-Tetralogie* (1940-1944). Cfr. Heiko Postma, *Griechenland – ein deutsches Drama? Über Dieter Reibles Inszenierung von Gerhart Hauptmanns 'Atriden'* in Bielefeld, in: *Theater Heute*, 6, 1989, p. 27-28.

relieved in the middle of the nineteenth century by another one, the rise of the Aryan model.⁴³

The nineteenth century, with its exaltation of the classical values in Victorian England and Neohellenist Germany, often proved to be a highly ideological and plainly racist construction, a conclusion which did not lose anything of its truth during and after the great world wars. Put in paradigmatic terms, people are not always aware of the blind spots (selection of problems as well as the lack of selection) they cherish during certain historical periods. Did not Sally Goetsch say: "Victorian and post-Victorian scholars – male scholars – denied the possibility that their great Greek heroes mistreated women, and denied equally the possibility that their own culture was less than enlightened in its attitude toward women. Our early authorities approached Greek texts with an enormous blind spot and a patriarchal agenda which may have been so familiar a part of their lives as to be invisible to them. The Greeks suffered from the same blind spot and spent a good deal of time convincing themselves that women did not suffer from the restrictions imposed on them"⁴⁴.

So far, a first line of criticism had to do with "mental colonialism", with the problem of Eurocentrism and with the pride of selling the *Oresteia* as a typically Western solution.

Progress

A second line of thought concerns the legitimation of the idea of progress founded by Apollo. Did not Malcolm Heath say that the *Oresteia* was "a confident, self-congratulatory celebration of the city, its institutions and cults, its prosperity and security"⁴⁵? The traditional view of the *Oresteia* considers the process of civilisation as the ultimate synthesis on a religious, cultural and social level. In the 1960 production of the *Oresteia* by Vittorio Gassman, the public was invited to participate in the last scenes of the *Eumenides* and to dance exuberantly, in order to celebrate the birth of democracy.⁴⁶ In terms of Hegelian philosophy, these last scenes not only represent the necessary synthesis of the many oppositional values, but it also meant a gigantic step towards the realisation of "der Geist".

⁴³ Martin Bernal, *Black Athena. The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume I. The Fabrication of Ancient Greece*, London, 1991, Vintage (1987), p. 317 and 282; see the discussion in *Arethusa*, *The Challenge of Black Athena. Special Issue*, Fall 1989 and *Arethusa* XXV, 1992, 1 (Molly Levine, *Multiculturalism and the Classics*, p. 215-221).

⁴⁴ Sally Goetsch, *Playing Against the Text. Les Atrides and the History of Reading Aeschylus*, in: *The Drama Review* 38, 1994, 3, p. 89.

⁴⁵ Malcolm Heath, *The Poetics of Greek Tragedy*, London, 1987, Gerald Duckworth & Co, p. 69.

⁴⁶ Hellmut Flashar, *Antikes Drama auf der Bühne Europas*, in: *Gymnasium* 100, 1993, p. 197.

In recent times, the *Oresteia* has been contested as representing a kind of thinking that came into being during the Enlightenment. The *Oresteia* is said to have delivered the mythical model for the kind of progress that since the eighteenth century has motivated socio-political well-being in the West. Formulated in a postmodern terminology, one could say that the *Oresteia* functioned as a Masterstory that has established the foundations for the Western concepts of order, truth, rationality and justice. However, after Auschwitz, as they say, only few things are left of all the noble thoughts that resulted from the "Age of Reason". All founding stories of the Western idea of truth and reason have become suspect.

Since Apollo and Athena, as the most recent representatives of the Olympian world, clearly stand for law and order based on rationality and patriarchal rights, they are evidently questioned for the kind of identity that they assumed.

Nowadays, it is fashionable to wonder why Orestes is acquitted in vs. 752, at a moment that the tragedy still has some 300 verses to go, a third of the tragedy. Meanwhile, the Furies have to be convinced that they have to accommodate themselves to the verdict of the Areopagus. But even before this could happen, some questions arise about the voting behaviour of the jury itself: does the intervention of Athena mean that the twelve members of the jury voted six in favor and six against the proposition and that the voice of Athena was a supplementary voice for Orestes, or that the jury consisted of only eleven human members with Athena as the twelfth divine part? In the latter case, more Athenian citizens would have voted against Orestes and Apollo. However, in both cases, it is Athena who decides and it is her art of persuasion and not the legal settlement which determines the events.

In Aeschylus' drama, Persuasion (cf. Peitho, vs. 885) is present everywhere. In the first tragedy, Clytemnestra, as a clear proof of it, succeeds in convincing the chorus, which in the beginning is hostile to her, of the things that happened in the Trojan war. It is Clytemnestra again, who in a masterly piece of manipulation, convinces her husband to walk upon the purple clothes and to enter the palace. She is the key figure in the first two tragedies which realise, in a cunning way and not through the use of power, all her wishes. When Clytemnestra, in the fifth act of the *Agamemnon*, leaves the palace, triumphing over the corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra, holding the sword in her hands, she says: (vs. 1372 sqq.):

*Before I said much to suit the time,
but I shall feel no shame to say the opposite.*

Apparently, many words of the queen have a hidden meaning. As she is trying, continuously, to deceive her adversaries, not disposing of male power

and authority, she resorts to a kind of words which are ambiguous and cheating. Acting this way, she anticipates on Athena who wants the Furies to be on her side and uses both the promises and the threatening presence of her father Zeus to this end. Apparently, the *Oresteia* testifies to an important historical transformation. Blood feud becomes a system of legal jurisdiction, the creation of the polis with her judicial institutions puts an end to an endless series of revenge and retaliation. But some important questions remain: what kind of *dike* and whose *dike* did triumph? Everybody is claiming *dike* to be on his or her side: Zeus brings *dike* (*Aga.* 525-6), Agamemnon brings *dike* (*Aga.* 813), Clytemnestra claims *dike* by killing her husband (*Aga.* 1432), Orestes brings *dike* (*Cho.* 641), the Furies want to be respected on the altar of their *dike* (*Eum.* 539) and Athena too wants *dike* for the town (*Eum.* 993-4). The realization of all those different kinds of *dike* results in a difficult and heterogeneous corpus of judicial thoughts which can not be disentangled so easily. In fact, tensions on different levels are not at all dissolved, everybody's choice is caught in a double bind situation. What looks like a social and moral order is only a temporary balance, extremely precarious and continuously ambiguous. Words escape from the control of the community and point at varying engagements and arrangements. The words of both Clytemnestra and Athena mean at the same time more and less and create uncertainties which lead to a climate of fear. Simon Goldhill, in his study of the semantic field of *dike* in the *Oresteia*, says: "Moreover, the message of ambiguity is stressed in the very process of the dramatic exchange of language, as the different characters" rhetorical strategies appropriate the language of *dike* to their own causes. This play dramatizes the "strife of warring words"; and such a challenging critique of man's ability to know "fairness", "equal rights" as more than mere names is echoed throughout the course of Greek tragedy".⁴⁷

The rhetorical way in which Aeschylus structured his great tragical drama (and especially the arguing role of Apollo and Athena) evokes today a number of reflections about the part he himself played in the "Enlightenment" of fifth century Athens. The *Oresteia*, with all the attention it devotes to human and divine *dike*, certainly contains a restriction of cosmic religiosity in favor of a human rationality and a secularized form of justice.

Apart from the desire for a democratic order, the trilogy also acknowledges the existence of a number of destabilizing factors. On the one hand, it introduces a process of law and order, through which an "enlightened" society

⁴⁷ Simon Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy*, Cambridge, 1986, Cambridge University Press, p. 47; cfr. Alan H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylus. Eumenides*, o. c., p. 19: "Perhaps the most ubiquitous thematic idea in the *Oresteia* is that of justice (*dike*) – justice as righteousness and justice as punishment; and in questions of justice, the poet at every stage involves the gods".

promises itself the ideals of progress, democracy and truth, a typical illustration of Habermas' position. On the other hand, the voice of contestation, transgression and manipulation seems to represent an equal part. Studying the impact of Athenian political thought on the dilemmas of modernity, Christopher Rocco says: "Consensus of a kind is achieved, but by a manipulative rhetoric, which the trilogy seeks to overcome, and through a sexually ambivalent figure who transgresses the very norms of gender she seeks to establish".⁴⁸

Considering a number of recent productions, one can not deny that some severe doubts about progress and enlightenment struck the minds of theatre directors too. Did not "Theater Heute"⁴⁹ write about the Moscow production of the *Oresteia* by Peter Stein in 1994, ten years after the first German staging: "Stein denunziert diese Demokratieinstrument als Farce". Apparently, the *Eumenides*, in this version, was "noch stärker kabarettistisch verjuxt".

In a recent American production, made at the American Repertory Theatre and staged by the Swiss director François Rochaix, one has the impression that "the trial of Orestes becomes a travesty of justice and of the Olympian gods who preside over it". The actress playing Athena, looks dressed up "for Halloween". Rochaix says: "I am totally sensitive to the Mafia relationship between Athena and Apollo, who says not one intelligent thing in the whole trial. All he says to the jury is "I am the son of Zeus, so pay attention, because Zeus is more important than your vote". This is terrible. Today, we have grown a little, and perhaps we don't buy this. Perhaps we listen more to what the Furies say and understand that they also have something to defend".⁵⁰

The Italian director Romeo Castellucci, who set up the Societas Raffaello Sanzio and who is considered to be one of the most radical representatives of the "new Italian theatre", was also rather harsh in his judgment: "I refused to take for granted the cultural conclusion of the "Oresteia": the establishment of the Areopagus, the absolution of Orestes (with the tied vote) and the definitive institution of a patriarchal and spiritual system to overcome the *ius naturale* (carrier of violence of life⁵¹, of matter, of darkness of the consternation of ephemeral bodies) because if it is true that the "Eumenides" achieve this spiri-

⁴⁸ Christopher Rocco, *Tragedy and Enlightenment. Athenian Political Thought and the Dilemmas of Modernity*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, 1997, University of California Press, p. 26.

⁴⁹ Michael Skasa, *Unterwältigend! Michael Skasa über Peter Steins Moskauer ORESTEIA*, in: *Theater Heute* 3, 1994, p. 10.

⁵⁰ Scott T. Cummings, *Blood Relations. The primordial family drama unfolds in a boldly reconceived 'Oresteia' at American REP*, in: *American Theatre*, February 1995, p. 15.

⁵¹ Violence was preeminently present in the danced version of the *Oresteia*, Neuschnee in Troja, staged by the choreographer Joachim Schlömer in Ulm, see Christoph Müller, *Poesie im Raum: Zwischen Wort und Sinn*, in: *Theater Heute* 2, 1994, p. 19-22.

tual overcoming it is also true that the entire "Oresteia" is made up of those very elements to be overcome. (...). It was like reading the inverted view of the original order, the matriarchal order, as it gives way and surrenders. In short, my sympathy lies with Clytemnestra".⁵²

Feminism

A third line of discussion investigates the gendered reality which dominates the trilogy. At the end of the *Eumenides*, a sociological consensus is reached at the cost of a number of elements which are considered to confuse order and reason. Hence, the exclusion of the female as the preliminary condition to settle norms and values in the area of ancient biology, sexuality and politics. For Camille Paglia, Athena is anything but a value-free goddess. She is an armed and armoured creature, a female warrior without chthonic necessity, who locks forever the womb of nature and who realizes progress in history at the cost of abolishing the power of the female.⁵³ On the one hand, this radical attack on one of the main figures of classical mythology may seem implausible, but as long as one cherishes the many forms of Western European classicism, patriarchal points of view are never conspicuous. On the other hand, what one is asked to believe is quite spectacular: the genesis of democracy, one of the cultural highlights in Western history, took place by the efforts of a goddess who originated from the head of her father, without ever having known a mother.

Of course, we know now that categories which, for centuries, appeared to be neutral, like male / female, father / mother, do not have a universal meaning, and that they, on the contrary, change over time and culture. Formulated in the terminology of Mircea Eliade, the conceptual framework of gender depends on the "Gründungsmythos" which, from the very start, determines a politics of gender and social behaviour. Since connotations of inferiority characterize the position of the female in foundation myths like the ones of Adam and Eve in Christianity, and Pandora or Hera in Greek mythology, the supreme and first female lends this kind of negative image to all subsequent females.

Feminists have reacted in a threefold way against the inferior position of women in Western European civilisation.

⁵² Romeo Castellucci, The "Oresteia" through the Looking-glass, in: *Theaterschrift* 11, 1997, The Return of the Classics?, p. 197.

⁵³ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertite to Emily Dickinson*, London, 1990, Penguin Books. See also the criticism formulated by Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics*, London, 1969, Sphere Books.

First of all, the so called "theoreticians of equality" wanted to create equal chances for both sexes and struggled to make women visible in all cultural activities. Women did not have to remain "le deuxième sexe"⁵⁴ (De Beauvoir, 1949) and they were encouraged to tell their own stories (to have *A Room Of One's Own*⁵⁵), so they could be integrated in a new literary canon. They had to (re)invent mythical stories which focused both on the dominant part played from the beginning by women and on their religious power. The Goddess Movement, stressing the necessity of a female supreme being, urged women to elaborate new versions of a Gründungsmythos. In the case of *Oresteia*, the Goddess has been reinvented by Christa Wolf and Marion Bradley in their novels on the Trojan war and on the adventures of Cassandra.⁵⁶ This new kind of imagination certainly has stimulated a number of directors who inserted fragments of Wolf in the classical texts or made some postmodern collages out of them. One of the first directors to have told the story of Clytemnestra from a female point of view was Martha Graham in 1958. As a dancer and choreographer, she focused on the fortune and misfortune of this strong queen and called her three-act ballet *Clytemnestra*. The solution she proposed looked like a redemption in a Christian sense, since, in the Underworld, she embraced and forgave her son Orestes, the murderer. Maternal love grew stronger than political reason, personal forgiveness replaced the public court.⁵⁷

In a recent American production staged in the Guthrie Theater (1993), Isabelle Monk, a black actress, explicitly asked to play the part of Clytemnestra. The artistic director Garland Wright brought together three original Greek tragedies into a new triptych "Euripides's *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, the play of the child-killer; Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the play of the husband-killer; and Sophocles's *Electra*, the play of the mother-killer". In his opinion, "these plays provide extraordinary roles for women. Although they are the artifacts of a society that denied women respect and the most basic freedoms – where to be a woman was to be "nothing" – the authors of three Clytemnestra plays each created women of energy and purpose who face whatever circumstance puts before them, act decisively and as Monk says, "take responsibility for their actions". They are women who – regardless of their crimes and the

⁵⁴ Simone De Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, Paris, 1949, Editions Gallimard.

⁵⁵ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1928), Harmondsworth, 1973, Penguin; Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of their own. British Women Novelists from Brönte to Lessing*, Princeton, 1977, Princeton UP; Marilyn French, *The Women's Room*, London, 1979, Sphere Books.

⁵⁶ Katherina Glau, *Christa Wolfs "Kassandra" und Aischylos' "Orestie"*. Zur Rezeption der griechischen Tragödie in der deutschen Literatur der Gegenwart, Heidelberg, 1996, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, p. 386.

⁵⁷ John Chioles, o. c., p. 5-13.

moral judgments a modern audience may place upon them – demand respect".⁵⁸

Imagining strong women and introducing them into the curricula and repertoires may have filled up an historical absence; however, most of the time, this feminist strategy of making up did not lead to cultural criticism and political consciousness.

Feminists, arguing in the line of the so called "theoreticians of difference", form a second way of handling problems. Feminists like Cixous, Irigaray, or Kristeva⁵⁹ created a new language which expressed and liberated feminine feelings and emotions, not in an identical way to men, but rather idiosyncratically. This new approach never existed before and would radically consolidate the existence of two sexes. As man wrote to and for man, women had to write to women, and as women. In order to describe the way in which meaning (and in particular meaning attributed to mythical and symbolic stories) functions in a number of disciplines, its processes have been described and analyzed on a structural basis. Since the beginning of the century, structural linguistics and anthropology (as practiced by Lévi-Strauss) showed the way to analyse myths and literary texts in oppositional pairs. Ever since, structuralists and semioticians like to show how ideological texts organize the opposition man/woman, day/night, objectivity/subjectivity, sun/moon. Froma Zeitlin studied a series of linked semantic oppositions in the *Oresteia*, like father/mother, center/limit, order/chaos, head/belly, phallus/womb, reason/unreason, clarity/obscurity⁶⁰ and concluded that in this text too a hidden hierarchy always lends priority to the first term.⁶¹

Since men have for centuries impregnated the symbolical order in language with their categories and their experiences, rewriting their stories as a woman, even in a reversed or new order, does not change a lot. Hélène Cixous, who worked together closely with Ariane Mnouchkine, is one of the most famous "theoreticians of difference", who started up a process of associative and physical writing, "l'écriture féminine", or, "writing as a woman".

⁵⁸ Laurence Shyer, Clytemnestra Front and Center, in: *American Theatre*, January 1993, p. 44.

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Abel (Ed.), *Writing and Sexual Difference*, Brighton, 1982, Harvester; Gayle Greene & Kanhn Coppélia (Eds.), *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism*, London, 1985, Methuen; Toril Moi, *Sexual / Textual Politics. Feminist Literary Theory*, London, 1985, Methuen.

⁶⁰ Froma I. Zeitlin, *The Dynamics of Misogyny. Myth and Mythmaking in Aeschylus's Oresteia*, in: Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other. Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*, Chicago and London, 1996, The University of Chicago Press, p. 181-182.

⁶¹ Eileen Gregory, H. D. and Hellenism. *Classic Lines*. Cambridge, 1997, Cambridge University Press, p. 23: "The field of play belonging to such opposition is the universe of tragedy, depicting a problematic social and psychic reality. Indeed, the *Oresteia* might be seen as an implicit model in the classicist's imagination of modern crisis".

Apparently, Mnouchkine did not work out her project, *Les Atrides*, in this way, since she staged four "patriarchal" tragedies, adding as an introduction the Euripidean play *Iphigeneia in Aulis*⁶² to the Aeschylean *Oresteia*. However, starting to focus on the maternal feelings of Clytemnestra and the loss of Iphigeneia, changed the perspectives abruptly and called attention to the vulnerability of the queen. Playing against the text of Aeschylus and the image of a fierce and dominant Clytemnestra, Mnouchkine staged a weak and sympathetic woman. The chorus of Furies was not represented as frightening creatures, their number being strongly reduced, and the goddess Athena could easily triumph upon them, since both parties, right from the start, understood their mutual rights and position⁶³. As Sally Goetsch said: "Mnouchkine rendered the end of the scene touchingly sentimental. Athena gave the converts motherly hugs before sending them within the hill" (p. 87). Adding Oriental dress and movements, kathakali-inspired make-up and an exotic music to a Western text, as well as introducing a non-naturalistic theatrical style instead of the well known classical register, made of *Les Atrides* a spectacle with a second level of meaning. The apparent patriarchal structures, the well known gender categories and all the semantic deep structures were rendered ambiguous, disturbed. Male and female, light and darkness, rationality and irrationality lost the evidence of the Western signifying processes and "as-sign-ment", since signs themselves have been broken loose of their referential basis.

A third feminist approach relies on the "theory of deconstruction"⁶⁴. It questions traditional answers and schemes in a hermeneutic, often destabilizing and ironic way⁶⁵. "Woman" as a sign has been used in ever changing economic and sociocultural conditions and the sexual difference never served the same purpose. Presenting heterogeneous images of women on the scene illustrated the various perspectives from which the female has been seen. Athena and Apollo laughing at the end of the *Eumenides* illustrates the will to change codes and references. Athena, as the female protagonist, refuses an identifica-

⁶² Jean-Michel Gliksohn, *Iphigénie. De la Grèce antique à l'Europe des Lumières*, Paris, 1985, PUF.

⁶³ David Williams, *Collaborative Theatre. The Théâtre du Soleil. Sourcebook*, London & New York, 1999, Routledge (Chapter V. Myth and the contemporary: *Les Atrides* (1990-1992), p. 177-223).

⁶⁴ Cfr. Patrice Pavis, *The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama: The Case of Postmodern Theatre*, in: *Modern Drama* XXIX, 1986, 1 (Special Issue. *The Classical Heritage of Modern Drama*), p. 1-22.

⁶⁵ Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures. Feminism and Cinema*, London, 1982, Routledge & Kegan; Sue-Ellen Case (Ed.), *Feminism and Theatre*, London, 1988, The Macmillan Press; Lynda Hart (Ed.), *Making a Spectacle. Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*, Ann Arbor, 1989, The University of Michigan Press.

tion with the traditional male gaze and causes the foundation story to be burrowed under suspicion: the Masterstory is questioned.

This is also the context in which Foucault worked. His analysis of the structures of power in Western European thought indicated that the process of Enlightenment continuously created conditions of suppression as well. His "genealogical" criticism asked questions about the exclusion of some voices and, in the case of the *Oresteia*, would call our attention to the various kinds of suppressive language. A rhetoric of the concealed and suppressed word and of the withheld gender category testifies to the power that allowed and created suppressions and exclusions in the dominant Classical Discourse. For about 2,500 years, the idea of the enlightened subject dominated the interpretation of the *Oresteia*. For the moment, the genealogical criticism of Foucault and his attention to paradoxes disturbing the dominant truth, has become an important platform of discussion. Democracy, yes, but for whom, on whose terms, at which price?

Playing the *Oresteia* during the summer of 1991 in the old Machine Workshop in Katajanokka, The Raging Roses, a group of 33 Finnish actresses, stressed the complicated and often contradictory motivations in the hearts of the women: three actresses played the part of Cassandra, five actresses that of Clytemnestra. At the end, they questioned ironically the doom of Orestes by the jury and the gods, Athene and Apollo. Dispersion of the traditional parts of a tragedy, questioning of the structure of the trilogy, disbelief in the unified and autonomous human subject, disentanglement of femininity from specific female identities: these four characteristics connected deconstructivism to postmodernism and feminism.⁶⁶

Conclusion

The triple problem that we discussed dealt with Eurocentrism, the foundation of democracy and the position of women. Today, each of the three topics is seriously questioned by a large number of philologists and artists. They are all interested in topics dealing with aspects of deconstructivism and they wonder whether modernism and postmodernism are the right alternatives to the Enlightenment. Looking back at a number of foundation stories (texts, myths, practices, rituals, symbols), they analyse their historical evolution and actual legitimacy. As one of the oldest and most important touchstones in the consti-

⁶⁶ Pirjo Helena Vaittinen, *The Oresteia of the Roses: beyond Time and Order* (Paper presented at the Thessaloniki International Theatre Conference, 1997).

tution of Western democracy, the *Oresteia* is subjected to a serious questioning of its ideological premises.⁶⁷

The Aeschylean idea of the total subordination of the female to the male, because of her lust and unbridledness, is only one of the obvious postulates that encounter serious opposition today. Less obvious, but no less important, are the questions which have revealed themselves since Enlightenment about progress and transculturation.

Therefore, classics no longer appear as the place and the moment of having it right, of a dogmatic admiration, but of a discussion with a partner who, 2,500 years ago, also had to deal with a lot of tensions and who had to find temporary balances for all unresolved problems. More than ever, classics are to be conceived in terms of meeting like-minded people, who are persuaded both of the importance and of the relativity of things, as well of the nobledness of the human mind as of its constant need to suppress others. Classicistic reverence for texts and monuments needs to yield in an open discussion, not directed against texts, but against interpretations of texts. The interpretation of the *Oresteia* is an open process, a never ending story, that testifies to the richness of this work of art and that teaches us at the same time who we are and where we have come from.

⁶⁷ In her article *The hero of our time: classic heroes and post-classical drama*, Felicity Rosslyn analyzed some important plays by O'Neill, Miller, Strindberg and Ibsen and found "a surprising unanimity, for all their differences"; "There is a striking amount of agreement in our plays", she said, "between modern definitions of tragic masculinity and ancient ones. The details differ, of course, and so do the vocabularies and symbolism; but when we look beneath the surface we can hardly avoid concluding that the answer to our opening question – has drama ever shown the truly heroic? – is no. What our dramas return to again and again is how heroic the male would be, were it not for the female – female values, female seduction, and the primary female power of the mother", in: Lin Foxhall and John Salmon (Ed.), *Thinking men. Masculinity and its Self-Representation in the Classical Tradition*, London & New York, 1998, Routledge, p. 194-196.