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**THE POLITICS OF RE-(EN)VISIONING:
CONTEMPORARY BRITISH REWRITINGS
OF GREEK AND ROMAN TRAGEDIES**

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PREFACE

This doctoral thesis originates from the intersection between my long-standing interest in twentieth- and twenty-first-century British literature and culture, and especially drama and theatre, and the research area promoted by our Department's PhD programme, that is the fortune of the classics in modern and contemporary literatures. I must admit that it has been highly demanding for a young scholar with a background in English Studies to approach an extremely complex and 'overwhelming' topic such as tragedy, whose epistemological uncertainty and ontological resonance tend to discourage even classicists. Despite the inherent difficulties in dealing with this kind of material, the examination of the fractured and, at the same time, close relationship between Greek and Roman tragedies and their contemporary British appropriations has proven to be extremely thought-provoking and timely.

Although modern-day translations, productions, adaptations, and appropriations of ancient tragedies (especially Greek texts) abound on the contemporary British stage, scholars from various fields do not seem particularly interested in exploring their proliferation in today's Britain, as will be pointed out in the Introduction. Remarkably, *pace* Shakespeare, nowadays English Studies are more resistant than other disciplines to the investigation of tragedy. Rita Felski suggests that the recent decline of scholarly interest in the most prestigious dramatic form is probably due to the fact that "critics have challenged the automatic deference and pre-eminence accorded to the works of the canon" and confirms that "such a change of fortune is more evident in English departments than in comparative literature and continental philosophy, where tragedy

continues to occupy a prominent place”.¹ Similarly, Sarah Annes Brown stresses a stubborn resistance towards transhistorical research in the study of English literature, which – in her opinion – depends on restrictive academic policies:

institutional structures and related cultural pressures have discouraged transhistorical work in English studies. In fact, transhistorical research is encouraged far less than interdisciplinary research. Although literary scholars are encouraged to (try to) come to terms with science, art, theology, and philosophy we are made to feel anxious about attempting to engage with the literature of different centuries simultaneously.²

This study does not adopt what Brown would define as a transhistorical approach, since it does not juxtapose tragedies written and produced in different ages, thus transgressing periodical boundaries. Instead, it focuses on three different kinds of present-day rewritings of Graeco-Roman tragic texts – Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love*, Tony Harrison’s *Prometheus*, and Martin Crimp’s *Cruel and Tender* – written, staged or screened in Britain (or, more precisely, in England) between the emergence of the ‘Cool Britannia’ phenomenon and the War on Terror, that is between the end of the twentieth century and the dawn of the new millennium (1996-2004). My concern here is not with comparing the classical source with its contemporary appropriation from a philological perspective. Rather, I aim to explore and contextualise the English-language re-interpretation of the original by investigating its poetics and politics and offering a close reading that un-makes and dis-members the rewriting in order to detect the (frequently obliterated and subverted) classical traces, those *residuals* (“leftover[s] from the past

¹ Rita Felski, “Introduction”, in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. by Rita Felski (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 1-25 (p. 1).

² Sarah Annes Brown, “Preface”, in *Tragedy in Transition*, ed. by Sarah Annes Brown and Catherine Silverstone (Malden (MA), Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell, 2007), pp. xi-xii (p. xi).

demanding to be thought as [] question[s] for the future”³) inscribed in the text(ure) and aimed at interpellating the contemporary reader/audience.

From a theoretical and methodological point of view, this thesis draws upon – among others – some of the valuable tools provided by Lorna Hardwick’s classical reception research, such as the fascinating idea of crossing spatial, linguistic, and generic boundaries as well as temporal borders (which has been particularly useful for my analysis of Harrison’s film/poem *Prometheus*). However, it is worth pointing out that this dissertation should not be considered a work belonging to the field of Classical Reception Studies, in that it adopts an entirely contemporary perspective and does not adhere to some of the main tenets of this discipline. As Hardwick argues in her seminal book defining the borders of this emerging field, “Reception studies require us to look closely at the source text and context as well as the receiving ones. [...] The traditional practices of classical philology have an important part to play in developing the broader cultural philology that reception studies needs”.⁴ By contrast, as I have already noted, this doctoral thesis does not offer a comparative reading of the two artefacts, but rather gives special prominence to the receiving British (con)text and to the contemporary writer, drawing parallels between his/her ‘original’ output and the rewriting itself. Moreover, the approach adopted in this dissertation is essentially *synchronic*, whereas – according to Hardwick – the study of reception on the stage “of course requires both diachronic and synchronic models to be considered and they are increasingly being used

³ Diane Elam quoted in Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 130.

⁴ Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 10. The eminent classicist Edith Hall confirms that “[i]ntellectual insights into Performance Reception take place at the intersection of the diachronic history of a text (especially but not exclusively its previous performance history) and the synchronic reconstruction of what the text will have meant at the time of the production being investigated”. Hall, “Towards a Theory of Performance Reception”, in *Theorising Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice*, ed. by Edith Hall and Stephe Harrop (London: Duckworth, 2010), pp. 10-28 (p. 18).

in conjunction with one another”.⁵ On the whole, therefore, this work remains rooted in English Studies, while being enriched by contacts with various other disciplines such as Theatre and Performance Studies, Adaptation Studies, Reception Studies, Translation Studies, and Cultural Studies.

Another clarification is necessary at this stage: at the crossroads of different fields – some of them less established than others – terminology tends to be highly slippery and unstable. As the first theoretical chapter will make clear, when it comes to the rewritten text, each critic opts for a different term, including ‘version’, ‘adaptation’, ‘appropriation’, ‘rewriting’ – to name just a few. In this study, when I do not employ the technical term ‘hypertext’ coined by Gérard Genette, I will resort to ‘rewriting’ or, alternatively, ‘appropriation’, since they have the advantage of highlighting the creative (and frequently subversive) potential of the contemporary text. Instead, I tend to avoid ‘adaptation’, which emphasises the derivative quality of the artefact, and the vaguer term ‘version’. It should also be noted that the title of this thesis, *The Politics of Re-(en)visioning*, draws upon the notion of *re-visionary writing*, as theorised by the English scholar Peter Widdowson in *Literature* (1999):

The term ‘re-vision’ deploys a strategic ambiguity between the word *revise*: ‘to examine and correct; to make a new, improved version of; to study anew’, and *re-vision*: to see in another light; to re-envison or perceive differently; and thus to recast and re-evaluate the ‘original’.⁶

As Widdowson has pointed out, the term *re-vision* was coined by the American lesbian-feminist poet Adrienne Rich, who employed it to refer to a radical appropriation of the canon aiming at countering the oppressive patriarchal culture. As Rich stated in her essay “When the Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision” (1971):

⁵ Hardwick, p. 58.

⁶ Widdowson, p. 164 [original emphasis].

Re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction [...] We need to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us.⁷

In keeping with Rich's and Widdowson's formulations, this thesis examines three contemporary British (hyper)texts which aim to re-(en)vision the classics, that is to re-interpret them "with fresh eyes".

Finally, this study is divided into seven chapters. The introduction explores twentieth- and twenty-first-century British drama and theatre, focusing on the enormous impact of 'new writing' and considering the parallel practice of rewriting ancient tragedies. These preliminary remarks are followed by two theoretical chapters, the first dealing with intertextuality and adaptation, and the second addressing notions such as tragedy and the tragic, and their intersections with philosophy and literary criticism. As its title suggests, "Between Theory and Practice" functions as a bridge between the theoretical framework and the case studies. While the two chapters examining Kane's and Crimp's dramatic/theatrical rewritings have a more similar structure, the analysis of Harrison's filmic appropriation provides a notable example of inter-medial transmigration (from page/stage to screen through poetry). Each of these three chapters, however, offers a detailed analysis of the English-language hypertext, focusing on the rewriting, restaging, relocating (and, in Harrison's case, remediating) strategies employed by the British authors, as well as on the micro- and macro-politics pervading these 're-visionary' texts.

⁷ Quoted in Widdowson, pp. 164-5.

INTRODUCTION

STATE OF PLAYWRITING / STATE OF THE NATION:

CONTEMPORARY BRITISH THEATRE AND SOCIETY (1990-TODAY)

1. NEW WRITING FOR THE STAGE: AN OVERVIEW

As a theatre critic for the *Guardian* since 1971, Michael Billington has spent most of his nights seeing and reviewing plays. It is hardly surprising that this long-term professional (and personal) devotion makes him one of the most eminent figures in British arts journalism. Deeply convinced that since the end of the Second World War the stage “has acted as a uniquely informative mirror to the shifts and changes in our [British] society”,¹ in 2007 Billington published a now pivotal volume, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945*, with its title stressing the ongoing dialogue between the fourth-wall microcosm and the external macrocosm. In his words, the driving force of this comprehensive study is “an insatiable curiosity about the extent to which theatre was influenced by the political temper of the times and about the way it may even have propelled social change”.² However, Billington is far from being the only supporter of this fruitful relationship linking theatre, politics, culture, and society. For instance, in 2011 the theatre critic, journalist, broadcaster, and lecturer Aleks Sierz entitled his study on the dramatic output of the first decade of the twenty-first century *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today*. In this wide-ranging account, Sierz heralds the

¹ Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 401.

² Billington, *State of the Nation*, p. 3.

exuberance of the ‘new millennium drama’ as that of a new and exciting golden era, showing how playwriting can be an invaluable instrument for anatomising and re-envisioning Britain and Britishness. Moreover, he seems to identify a quasi-prophetic quality in contemporary writing for the theatre:

Most playwrights not only reflect and refract the reality around them; they sometimes anticipate and second guess the future. As they write and rewrite our notions of what it is to be British, they might stumble upon new conceptions of who we really think we are, and what we could become.³

Entirely in keeping with this sociopolitical approach, in their “Introduction” to *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights* (a collection written by a distinguished group of experts, mainly academics), Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, and Sierz himself argue that “British playwriting has historically had a close affinity not only with its material base (the theatre system that stages the plays), but also with the structures of British society, and especially with a more general discussion of economic, social and political issues”.⁴ If confirmation is needed – on the other side of the Atlantic, one of the leading scholars in the field, Christopher Innes, underlines the intrinsic role of theatre as a social art form: “in this [the twentieth] century the stage regained its position as a forum for public debate, which it has retained despite the drawing power of new media”.⁵

It is worth considering another distinctive feature of this dramatic tradition: British theatre gravitates around the figure of the playwright, the pivot on which the whole process revolves. This authorial eminence has been evident since 1956, the legendary *annus mirabilis* which conventionally marks the beginning of a revolution in

³ Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p. 1.

⁴ Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, and Aleks Sierz, “Introduction”, in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, ed. by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer, and Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), pp. vii-xxiv (p. vii).

⁵ Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama: The Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 1.

British theatre, coinciding with the staging of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre, London, on 8 May.⁶ In the (mythical) spring of that year, just before the theatre's opening, George Devine – the artistic director of the English Stage Company – stated that the Court was “not to be a producers' theatre or an actors' theatre” but “a writers' theatre”.⁷ Devine's declaration immediately became the theatre's mission, “[a] writerly vision” – as Isabella Imperiali has pointed out – “to move the country towards the stage but also, vice-versa, to produce plays written to focus on contemporary challenges and possibilities”.⁸ Although the politics of a theatre is in its artistic directors' (and – to a lesser extent – literary managers') hands, that of the Court is essentially the history of its dramatists and of the increasing wealth of *new writing*⁹ it has promoted. Indeed, the Sloane Square institution is internationally acknowledged as the home of this dramatic form, “a very British aesthetic”¹⁰ which has acquired the status of cultural phenomenon, thanks to its major contribution to the (re)definition of both personal and national identity. Sierz usefully classifies its main characteristics:

New writing is a distinctive genre of contemporary work which is often, although by no means exclusively, written by newly arriving or young playwrights, and characterised by the distinctiveness of the author's individual voice, the contemporary flavour of their language and themes, and sometimes by

⁶ For an intriguing counter-reading and deconstruction of the received discourse about the role of Osborne's play in the (hi)story of British drama, see Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁷ Quoted in Harriet Devine, “Introduction”, in *Looking Back: Playwrights at the Royal Court, 1956-2006*, Interviews by Harriet Devine (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 3-15 (p. 3).

⁸ Isabella Imperiali, “A Breeding Ground for Playwrights”, *Status Quaestionis: A Journal of European and American Studies*, 2 (2012), pp. 1-10 (p. 1).

⁹ The roots of this expression remain obscure: “Its origins are hazy: no one can agree on who invented it, or when. Perhaps it was originally coined simply in imitation of the various waves of new writing in postwar prose and poetry. Nevertheless, since the early 1970s, the term has become widely accepted. By 1975, the Arts Council Drama Department had set up a New Writing Committee, and the term was being used by theatre practitioners as well as by arts bureaucrats. Gradually, in the 1980s and 1990s, new writing acquired its current identity as a particular type of new work. Today, there is even a national new writing system”. Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, pp. 27-28.

¹⁰ Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, p. 17.

the provocative nature of its content or its experimentation with theatrical form.¹¹

Remarkably, this style combines a clear emphasis on newness and topicality with a (traditionally British) text-based approach and a (more or less explicit) social realist agenda. As Sierz argues, the differences between contemporary British theatre and its more experimental European counterparts are manifest:

Although it is true that the study of text-based drama can be a purely literary activity that ignores the realities of live performance, it is even truer that text-based theatre is one of the art forms at which the British excel. While Continental Europeans can boast of several powerful theatre movements, the British tradition is different. Abroad has theatre theories, the British have pragmatism; abroad has postdramatic theatre practices, the British have dialogue-based text. In short, here the writer is king (or queen).¹²

While on the Continent actors and especially directors play a decisive role in the artistic process, a playwright-centred/linguistic-oriented theatre is deeply rooted in words.¹³ In Britain, fruitful collaborations between talented writers and equally brilliant directors certainly exist, but – traditionally – the director acts as a sort of mediator between the textual artefact and the stage by translating the author’s written words into performative actions.

If the health of a creative system showing an enormous appetite for playtexts “is and will be inextricably bound up with the health of new writing”,¹⁴ we might say that British theatre has never been in better shape. Thanks to a group of specialised theatrical

¹¹ Sierz, “Theatre in the 1990s”, in *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*, ed. by Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), pp. 28-87 (p. 54).

¹² Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, pp. 50-51.

¹³ “And unlike France or Germany, where theatrical developments (with the signal exception of Bertolt Brecht) have been driven largely by directors, in Britain throughout the century it has been a playwright’s theatre. Indeed here, far more than elsewhere, dramatists have also worked as directors – from Shaw and Granville-Barker during the early decades of the century who directed their own plays, as Alan Ayckbourn has also done, up to Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, or David Hare who generally stage the work of other playwrights. It is also significant that when major stylistic advances became widely adopted in English theatre, most importantly in the 1950s with the impact of Brecht and Beckett, these new dramatic forms came from playwrights (even if Brecht in particular had also established himself as one of the leading German directors and manager of the world-famous Berliner Ensemble)”. Innes, p. 2.

¹⁴ David Edgar, “Provocative Acts: British Playwriting in the Post-war Era and Beyond”, in *State of Play: Playwrights on Playwriting*, ed. by David Edgar (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), pp. 1-34 (p. 3).

venues (principally, the Royal Court, Bush, Soho and Hampstead theatres in London, Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre and the Live Theatre in Newcastle upon Tyne) and a strong new writing politics,¹⁵ Britain is undeniably enjoying a time of renaissance. At the turn of the millennium, in the opening page of his passionate and very personal account of contemporary playwriting *The Full Room*, the current artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe, Dominic Dromgoole, celebrates this dramatic explosion:

Never before in the history of humans wandering, waving, shouting and scrawling their way across the face of the earth, have so many of them being engaged in the peculiar business of writing plays. This book's main purpose is to celebrate that fact. Like it or lump it, we are living in the middle of a carnival, a free revel, a fete, a flower show, a harvest home, a steam fair, a rock festival, a grand glorious tender wild burst of new plays.¹⁶

In a unique way, early twenty-first century Britain can be defined as a breeding ground for playwriting, a country in which many aspiring (young) writers have the opportunity to write plays and see them staged. However, quantity does not always mean quality: first-class dramatists share the stage with average ones, who will vanish after a couple of plays. If quantity does not guarantee quality, it certainly means heterogeneity: far from being a monolithic body, new writing is characterised by polyphony.¹⁷ As is well known, this term was used in 1929 by the Russian literary theorist Mikhail M. Bakhtin to describe Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels as 'dialogic' works "in which no individual

¹⁵ On the complexities of the new writing system in the past decade, see Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, pp. 28-45. In this section of his study, Sierz explores the material base of the new writing phenomenon, focusing on funding and venues. Even if – as mentioned – he firmly believes in the primacy of the writer and in the idea that British new writing belongs to a text-centred kind of theatre, here Sierz points out that in a competitive free-market system (once "a system of liberal corporatism") the dramatist becomes "just a commodity, and the play a product" (p. 43).

¹⁶ Dominic Dromgoole, *The Full Room: An A-Z of Contemporary Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. v.

¹⁷ "Another new writing myth worth questioning is the idea that it was an aesthetic monolith. In fact, from the start, it has been split between a naturalistic majority and a more experimental minority, between, if you like, *Look Back in Anger* and *Waiting for Godot*. These two kinds of writing have existed in a permanent state of tension, each challenging the other: the naturalists goading the experimentalists into being more comprehensible, with the minority challenging the majority to be more imaginative. [...] In fact, British new writing is, like the British nation, a mongrel beast". Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, pp. 25-26.

discourse can stand objectively above any other discourse; all discourses are interpretations of the world, responses to and calls to other discourses”.¹⁸ Far from being subjugated to its writer’s “guiding authoritative voice”¹⁹, the polyphonic novel – a stimulating “orchestration of diverse discourses”²⁰ – offers a dialogic world in which a multiplicity of characters and voices democratically compete. While the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure affirms that language can be examined exclusively in its abstract sense, it is important to bear in mind that Bakhtin firmly believes in the social situatedness of any utterance. Indeed, for the Russian theorist, language has by nature a relational and a social dimension. As the literary critic Graham Allen observes, “the dialogic, heteroglot aspects of language are essentially threatening to any unitary, authoritarian and hierarchical conception of society, art and life”.²¹ Moreover, the fact that any utterance is “socially specific and thus embodies the stratifications, unfinalized interpretations, ideological positions and class conflicts at work in society in any epoch, and indeed at any specific moment” means that “no attempt to explain language or art through an abstract system of generalizable relations is viable for those wishing to understand language, art, even speech acts”.²² Although Bakhtin was not interested in dramatic texts and even denied Shakespearian (and – more generally – theatrical) polyphony,²³ his notion could be adapted to describe the plurality of visions of

¹⁸ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 2nd edn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011[2000]), p. 23.

¹⁹ Allen, p. 23.

²⁰ David Lodge, *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 58.

²¹ Allen, p. 29.

²² Allen, p. 29.

²³ See Michail Bachtin, *Dostoevskij: Poetica e stilistica* (Torino: Einaudi, 2002), pp. 47-50, and Paola Pugliatti, “Introduction”, in *Shakespeare and Conflict: A European Perspective*, ed. by Carla Dente and Sara Soncini (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 17-23 (pp. 19-20). If Anatoly V. Lunacharsky – who contributed to the theoretical development of ‘polyphony’ – believed that this concept permeated Shakespeare’s (and Balzac’s) works, according to Bakhtin, the Bard’s plays simply offered embryonic elements of this notion (in the Italian translation, “elementi, germi, embrioni di polifonia” p. 49) and drama was “by nature alien to genuine polyphony” (quoted by Pugliatti, p. 20).

contemporary British playwriting, where heterogeneous and socially situated voices and points of view fruitfully interact often on equal terms, within a non-hierarchical dramatic system. On the one hand, this coexistence of different voices, visions, themes, and styles mirrors a fractured country with an even more fragmented national identity. On the other hand, the strength of new writing does not lie in individuality, but in the multifaceted portrait of today's Britain it offers. Dromgoole evaluates this powerful 'unity in diversity' as follows:

how fatuous is our quest for greatness in individual playwrights. How dumb the parallels with Shakespeare and Aeschylus [*sic*]. It doesn't matter what any individual is building, it is what they are all making together that is so remarkable. They are not all building in stone, they are not all pursuing a common purpose (far from it) but together they are constructing a unique record, a unique indictment and a unique celebration of the modern human spirit.²⁴

2. STAGING THE NINETIES

As has been observed, over the past sixty years British theatre has staged and explored the troubles of the nation. As in most Western societies, post-war culture in this country is conventionally divided into highly symbolical decades, such as the austere Fifties, the swinging Sixties, and the Thatcherite Eighties. The evocative power of decades resonates with theatrical significance: the history of contemporary British theatre has been shaped by the peculiarities of these meaningful temporal segments, as some artistic events and publications demonstrate.²⁵ Since the selected works examined

²⁴ Dromgoole, pp. x-xi.

²⁵ In 2006 the National Youth Theatre of Great Britain, an internationally renowned youth arts organization, celebrated its 50th birthday with six new plays defining every decade since the Fifties. In the same year Billington wrote an article for the *Guardian* entitled "All Our Yesterdays", which analysed post-war British theatre through this chronological subdivision (available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/aug/03/theatre.politicaltheatre>, last accessed 15 December 2015). Moreover, Methuen Drama's series *Decades of Modern British Playwriting* consists of six books

in this study cover the period from 1996 to 2004, it is worth offering an overview of the fascinating relationship between British theatre and society over the past two decades.

Thatcherism affected many facets of Eighties Britain. As far as the theatre is concerned, the Iron Lady's politics was translated into the 'customerisation' of the audience, the slogan of which was the (in)famous "bums on seat" motto. During this grim decade, the Arts Council became a repressive body ruled by the Conservative government, and musicals reigned on stage.²⁶ Markedly, the gloomy shadow of Thatcher's legacy haunted British theatre even when she was forced to resign in November 1990: because of draconian cuts, in the early Nineties new writing was still in crisis. In Graham Saunders's words:

there was widespread talk of a decline in both the quality and number of new plays being produced; theatres were under financial pressure to play safe with revivals of popular classics rather than take risks in commissioning new work; there also seemed to be a perception that British directors were more interested in establishing their reputations [*sic*] by working within the classical repertoire than by tackling new writing.²⁷

However, referring to the 1991 debuts of dramatists such as Philip Ridley and Anthony Neilson,²⁸ Sierz offers a glimmer of hope by suggesting that "just as the obituaries of new writing were appearing in the media, a revival was beginning in the smaller theatres and hidden corners of the British new writing system".²⁹

exploring the texts and contexts of contemporary drama from the 1950s to the 2000s and reconsidering each decade from today's perspective.

²⁶ For a detailed study of the relationship between British theatre and Thatcherism, see D. Keith Peacock, *Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999).

²⁷ Graham Saunders, "Introduction", in *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, ed. by Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 1-15 (p. 10).

²⁸ Ridley's *The Pitchfork Disney* opened at the Bush Theatre in January, while Neilson's *Normal* provoked the Edinburgh Festival audiences later in the year, and his *Penetrator* transferred from the Edinburgh's Traverse to London theatreland in 1993.

²⁹ Sierz, "Theatre in the 1990s", p. 55.

The Lyotardian collapse of grand narratives,³⁰ one of the central tenets of postmodernity, pervades Nineties playwriting. Billington argues that “[o]ne answer to that vacuum, of course, was to look back and see just where Britain as a society had gone wrong. And that was the response of David Hare”,³¹ a mature playwright who in his state-of-the-nation trilogy anatomised the troubles of three pivotal institutions – the Church of England (*Racing Demon*, National Theatre, 1990), the legal system (*Murmuring Judges*, NT, 1991), and politics (*The Absence of War*, NT, 1993).

Towards the middle of the decade, a new generation of first-time dramatists took a very different approach to the disappearance of those large-scale ideological frames and consequent ideological disorientation. The writer who seemed the most significant at that time was undoubtedly Sarah Kane, a twenty-three-year-old woman who with *Blasted* (1995) shocked the audience of the Royal Court’s Theatre Upstairs by bringing the Bosnian war on the British stage. With its experimental form and disturbing thematic concerns, Kane’s debut play was believed to mark the beginning of an excitingly new theatrical era. This confrontational aesthetic was theorized by Aleks Sierz in his influential book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001), in which he principally focused on the dramatic work of a cluster of young writers (Anthony Neilson, Sarah Kane, and Mark Ravenhill). His now familiar definition is worth quoting at some length. In his words, in-yer-face theatre refers to

any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message. It is a theatre of sensation: it jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm. Often such drama employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to. Questioning moral norms, it affronts the ruling ideas of what can or should be shown onstage; it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing

³⁰ See Jean-François Lyotard, *La Condition postmoderne. Rapport sur le savoir* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1979).

³¹ Billington, *State of the Nation*, p. 329.

taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort. Crucially, it tells us more about who we really are. Unlike the type of theatre that allows us to sit back and contemplate what we see in detachment, the best in-yer-face theatre takes us on an emotional journey, getting under our skin. In other words, it is experiential, not speculative.³²

Sierz did not invent this controversial label, a colloquial expression which frequently appeared in reviews and even in pop culture (the Spice Girls' song *Wannabe*, for instance, included this expression in one of its lines). He chose it among others ('Neo Jacobean', 'new brutalism', 'theatre of urban ennui', 'blood-and-sperm generation', 'cool theatre'...) because it was the only one that described the unique relationship between the audience and the stage in this type of drama.³³ In his opinion, this provocative practice should not be defined as a movement, but as "a new sensibility", that is "a mixture of emotion and ideas, of feeling and, if you like, ideology".³⁴ Besides, it should be compared to "an arena that you enter or leave, or you stay in or camp in, or whatever. It's not so much a club as a network".³⁵ It is also worth considering that this dramatic upsurge would not have been possible without the artistic directorship of Stephen Daldry, a far-sighted theatrical impresario who encouraged and promoted a new wave of twenty-something playwrights and "transformed the Court's Theatre Upstairs into a launching pad for young unknowns".³⁶

In a kind of double movement, in-yer-face theatre defined the decade yet, at the same time, sprang from the Nineties zeitgeist. As Saunders has pointed out, new writing "got itself caught – and subsequently surfed – on a far larger cultural wave that was

³² Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 4.

³³ See the 2003 interview conducted by Mireia Aragay and Pilar Zozaya, in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics*, ed. by Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Eric Monforte, and Pilar Zozaya (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 139-156 (pp. 142-4), and Sierz, "Theatre in the 1990s", pp. 57-59.

³⁴ Quoted in Aragay, Klein, Monforte, and Zozaya, eds., p. 142.

³⁵ Quoted in Aragay, Klein, Monforte, and Zozaya, eds., p. 144.

³⁶ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 38.

about to break that year [1994]: Cool Britannia”.³⁷ Though short-lived, this end-of-millennium artistic and cultural renewal, which was so reminiscent of the Swinging London era, cleverly marketed Britishness abroad: “Oasis and Blur, the Spice Girls and Girl Power, Charles Saatchi and the Young British Artists (the YBAs), Alexander McQueen and the clothes of ‘Highland Rape’: this cocktail of British culture was sold across the globe as Cool Britannia”.³⁸

Arts and politics were strongly interconnected in Nineties Britain. After eighteen years of Conservative government, when Tony Blair was elected in the New Labour landslide of May 1997, Cool Britannia had reached its apex, and its energy was probably starting to run out. The forty-four-year-old Prime Minister, whose “youthful image was enhanced by stories of his guitar-playing past”,³⁹ did his best to associate himself as quickly as possible with the cultural renaissance revolving around “the coolest city on the planet”⁴⁰ in order to please an entire generation of young voters. A picture of the singer Noel Gallagher chatting with him at a 1997 reception held at No. 10 Downing Street sealed this strategic alliance, strongly supported by the (inter)national media. This glam-pop image of the co-lead vocalist of Oasis sipping champagne and enjoying the company of the Prime Minister (which brings back memories of Harold Wilson posing with the Beatles in the mid-Sixties) epitomized New Labour’s appearance over substance. The (fashionable) cult of the new was thus embraced by politics to promote the image of a renovated country, ready to face the

³⁷ Saunders, p. 10.

³⁸ Ken Urban, “Cruel Britannia”, in *Cool Britannia?*, pp. 38-55 (p. 40).

³⁹ Sierz, “Theatre in the 1990s”, p. 30. On Blair’s youthful artistic ambitions, see Victoria Powell, “Tony Blair absolutely Modelled Himself on Mick Jagger”, *Guardian*, 06 January 2006 (available at <http://www.theguardian.com/music/2006/jan/06/popandrock>, last accessed 17 December 2015).

⁴⁰ On 4 November 1996, *Newsweek* magazine celebrated Britain’s capital city with an article entitled “Why London Rules” (available at <http://www.20thcenturylondon.org.uk/mol-98-27>, last accessed 17 December 2015). Sierz points out that even if Cool Britannia is a London-based phenomenon, “other parts of the UK come up with their own brands of cultural revival, with Cool Caledonia for Scotland and Cool Cymru for Wales” (Sierz, “Theatre in the 1990s”, p. 14).

third millennium and to conquer the world again. As the American playwright and director Ken Urban observes, a glamorized, ‘glocal’ Britishness swinging between old clichés and new trends became nothing more than a saleable product:

To sell a revamped Left, New Labour emphasized a love of youth culture by joining the cosmopolitan rebranding of Britain. England had never been able to shake off completely the image that it is a backwards-looking island of genteel tea parties and frumpy monarchs. By placing ‘creative industries’ and ‘lifestyles’ at the centre of a government-sponsored campaign, Blair hoped that Britain’s image would change, accentuating a vitality and creativity at odds with any nostalgic visage of Merrie England. Instead, New Labour looked at England as a brand, as a commodity, to be marketed and managed.⁴¹

In his eponymous essay, Urban theorises ‘Cruel Britannia’, “a youth-based counter-politics to the cynicism and opportunism of Cool Britannia”,⁴² well exemplified by the plays of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill (especially *Phaedra’s Love*, her 1996 rewriting of Seneca’s tragedy produced at the Gate Theatre, and his *Shopping and Fucking*, first staged at the Court the same year). For Urban, ‘cool’ is not the right adjective to define Nineties theatre. Rather, he suggests that the distinctive feature of in-yer-face sensibility is a potentially transformative kind of cruelty. Drawing on the theories of Antonin Artaud and Georges Bataille (two Surrealists who believed in the ethical possibilities which cruelty engenders), Urban points out that cruelty is an awakening force:

While coolness is associated with a cynical state of disinterestedness, cruelty is a very different affect. Though it may appear cold, cruelty carries with it the possibility of transformation, but – and this is what disturbs many critics of in-yer-face theatre – it does so without any moral framework or ideological certainty: no redemptive message, no socialist empowerment, no women running off to form a collective. Cruelty’s bringing-to-consciousness is a nihilistic one.⁴³

Moreover, Urban includes in his discussion Friedrich Nietzsche’s three-fold notion of nihilism (a philosophical issue, an affect and an ethical concept), which assumes two

⁴¹ Urban, p. 40.

⁴² Urban, p. 39.

⁴³ Urban, p. 43.

forms – one reactive (annihilation) and the other active (affirmation of life). Accordingly, thus, he stresses that Nineties dramatists aim to transform the first state into the second, since “the ethical possibilities of cruelty – like those discussed in Nietzsche’s philosophy – become the means by which the playwrights of the 1990s critique and intervene in their historical moment”.⁴⁴ Embedded within the context of Nineties materialistic society, “through its invocation of cruelty and its exploration of an active nihilism”, this phenomenon works – in a Heideggerian sense – “as a *delineation* of the moment occurring within the moment itself”.⁴⁵ Although on 6 July 1998 *Newsweek* “began to dismantle the mythology it had a hand in creating”⁴⁶ by announcing Cool Britannia’s death with the eye-catching headline “Uncool Britannia”, in Urban’s opinion Cruel Britannia was and is still alive. “[W]ith its comingling of coolness and cruelty, of nihilism and ethics”⁴⁷, he notes, its powerful legacy keeps influencing contemporary British playwriting.

Historicising contemporaneity is insidious. As the years proceed, a reconsideration of (recent) past events is necessary. When Sierz published his 2001 book on the outburst of plays written by a bunch of “Thatcher’s Children”,⁴⁸ the in-yer-face sensibility that he was describing had already vanished. As he admits, while his study “tried to ‘anticipate’ a perspective on the 1990s in 2000, when it was written, today it is essential to alter that perspective by looking at the past through a different optic”.⁴⁹ *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* did not invent a renaissance in British playwriting, but legitimised a consistent narrative about this phenomenon. Is,

⁴⁴ Urban, p. 45.

⁴⁵ Urban, p. 51 [original emphasis].

⁴⁶ Urban, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Urban, p. 52.

⁴⁸ Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 237.

⁴⁹ Sierz, “Afterword”, in *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s*, pp. 222-34 (p. 231).

then, this theatrical practice a myth created by Aleks Sierz? On the one hand, this avant-garde was indubitably real and influential, but on the other the theatre critic, in utterly postmodern fashion, “responded to this need for contemporary stories by offering a narrative about new writing for British theatre in the 1990s. Creating a narrative is, of course, a political act, and its first step is an act of labelling, or branding”.⁵⁰ Thus, Sierz’s discourse is inherently political and shares similarities with other (carefully constructed) mythologies. In his words, “[l]ike other myths, it tells a seductive story which offers the consoling illusions of coherence and closure”,⁵¹ and this implies deliberate choices to master an otherwise chaotic and heterogeneous dramatic landscape.

Aware of these self-imposed constraints, today the creator of this narrative suggests that the Nineties should be re-read considering some key points: the renaissance began in London’s art schools and not in the theatres; the real innovators were both older experimental playwrights influenced by European modernism (Caryl Churchill, Howard Barker, and Martin Crimp) and young avant-garde writers (Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and David Greig, to name but a few), thus the cult of youth was not a discriminating factor;⁵² Nineties new writing was not exclusively a London-based movement (the Scottish influence is pivotal to its genesis); last but not least, the 1993 murder of toddler James Bulger deeply shocked the country and affected Nineties

⁵⁰ Sierz, “We All Need Stories”: The Politics of In-Yer-Face Theatre”, in *Cool Britannia?*, pp. 23-37 (p. 24).

⁵¹ Sierz, “We All Need Stories”, p. 32.

⁵² “In practice [...] the age of playwrights is less important than the character of their work. At the 1999 London New Play Festival, for example, ten out of the twelve writers were over forty years of age. And that didn’t matter – they were all new. Age is less significant than the distinctive and original voice of the work. For while it is true that some playwrights do not keep up, and their writing style becomes increasingly old-fashioned, there are plenty that remain as contemporary as any youngster” (Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, p. 47).

(theatrical) sensibility.⁵³ Notably, as Sierz is not the only one to call for a reconsideration of this provocative narrative, the time has come for an effective deconstruction and reassessment of in-yer-face mythology.⁵⁴

3. STAGING THE NEW MILLENNIUM

While we are gradually distancing ourselves from the Nineties and increasingly modifying our perspective on the last decade of the twentieth century, the Third Millennium is still far from receding into history. Nevertheless, this section aims to offer a general overview on the dramatic and theatrical trends of this new era, ranging from explicit political statements to seemingly more nuanced explorations of the personal sphere. If Nineties theatre was believed to “turn[] its back on politics, retiring into privacy”, in the ‘Noughties’ “new writing multiplied in its practitioners and diversified in its subjects – and the ‘children’ of 1990s new writing rediscovered overtly political concerns”.⁵⁵

Arguably, the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed a new explosion of plays, fostered by the fact that the New Labour government “funded the arts with a rare generosity”.⁵⁶ The numbers are impressive: “At a very rough count, there were

⁵³ See Sierz, “Afterword”, pp. 231-4.

⁵⁴ Just to give some examples, the volume *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* was the result of a conference questioning the received story, *In-Yer-Face? British Drama in the 1990s*, held at the University of the West of England, Bristol, in 2002. In the first section of her study *Suspect Cultures: Narrative, Identity & Citation in 1990s New Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006), Clare Wallace observes that Sierz’s contribution “is undoubtedly a vibrant and useful account of a particular phenomenon and, especially, of plays as they first were performed and received, but it is quite narrowly focused on a London theatre context and necessarily excludes writers for whom viscerality was not the determining quality” (p. 20). In addition, in Spring 2015 the French research group RADAC (Recherche sur les Arts Dramatiques Anglophones Contemporains) published a special issue of its journal *Coup de Théâtre*, entitled *Le théâtre In-Yer-Face aujourd’hui : bilans et perspectives*, ed. by Susan Blattes and Samuel Cuisinier-Delorme.

⁵⁵ Middeke, Schnierer, and Sierz, pp. xiii-xiv.

⁵⁶ Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, p. 1.

some 3,000 new plays produced during the 2000s, more than double the amount of the previous decade”.⁵⁷ With its plurality in terms of form and content, this new wave well exemplifies the primary concern of post-war theatre, that is to say holding a mirror up to (the fragmentation of) British society and identity. The ‘new millennium drama’ can thus be considered a tool for examining the troubles of Noughties Britain, and, at the same time, “for excavating and interpreting the deepest, most complex and profound aspects of human experience”,⁵⁸ as the former Royal Court literary manager Ruth Little suggests.⁵⁹

From a socio-political point of view, the past decade could be defined as “the decade of fear”⁶⁰ because of the number of catastrophic events that affected the whole planet:

from the iconoclastic horror of 11 September 2001 to the devastation of the ‘war on terror’ in Iraq and Afghanistan; from the London bombings of 7 July 2005 to the global financial crisis of 2008/9 and the increasingly palpable evidence of planetary climate change, the major events of the new millennium have reminded us of our contingent lives and choices, our insatiable appetites and our frailty. Their consequences have propelled both emerging and maturing playwrights towards new paradigms and perspectives.⁶¹

This growing sense of insecurity has notable implications for contemporary identity and the way individuals perceive themselves and others: people’s emotional stability and the quality of their human relationships are deeply undermined by the general state of anxiety and insecurity. Models of selfhood are going through a serious crisis, interpersonal communication is more dysfunctional than ever, and angst pervades the everyday domestic sphere, which, just like society at large, seems to be on the point of

⁵⁷ Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, p. 1.

⁵⁸ Ruth Little, “Introduction”, in *The Methuen Drama Book of Royal Court Plays 2000-2010*, ed. by Ruth Little (London: Methuen Drama, 2010), pp. v-xii (p. xii).

⁵⁹ Little worked at the Court from 2007 to 2010.

⁶⁰ Stella Duffy, quoted in Billington, “All Our Yesterdays”. On the impact of fear on the cultural imagination, see Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear Revisited: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectation*, 4th edn (London: Continuum, 2006 [1997]).

⁶¹ Little, pp. v-vi.

collapsing. If nowadays human beings feel more frail and conflicted than ever, several British dramatists show they perfectly grasp this new vulnerability.

The dramatic output of this turbulent age oscillates between the global sphere and the local one, between macrocosm and microcosm. At an international level, the key event of the early Noughties was 9/11, a tragedy which shocked the Western world and triggered George W. Bush's War on Terror. Billington affirms that the consuming conflict was "as socially divisive as Suez and [...] had a crippling effect on the Labour government. Iraq may have marked the start of Blair's long, slow decline – it also galvanised British theatre".⁶² Arguably, one of the possible reactions of British theatre to this controversial war was the so-called 'verbatim theatre',⁶³ a kind of documentary drama "based on actual words spoken by 'real' people, without any prescribed form and characterised by both a resistance to recognition and a commitment to aesthetic experimentation".⁶⁴ For instance, David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (National Theatre, 2004), deals with the period leading to the invasion of Iraq by combining factual material with fictional elements, while Robin Soans's 2005 *Talking to Terrorists* – staged at the Royal Court by Out of Joint – is completely based on 'real' interviews.⁶⁵ As Jenny Hughes points out, "[a]s examples of 'verbatim theatre' each play exhibits a specific relationship to the representation of the 'real' in a time of war and raises questions about

⁶² Billington, "All Our Yesterdays".

⁶³ On verbatim theatre, see Andrew Haydon, "Theatre in the 2000s", in *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009*, ed. by Dan Rebellato (London and New York: Methuen Drama, 2013), pp. 40-100 (pp. 41-48).

⁶⁴ Cyrielle Garson, "Remixing Politics: The Case of Headphone-Verbatim Theatre in Britain", *JCDE: Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 2 (2014), pp. 50-62 (p. 50).

⁶⁵ Making a verbatim piece is extremely complex. Tom Cantrell, in *Acting in Documentary Theatre* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), reveals details about the rehearsal process, pointing out that the writer, director, and actors took notes instead of recording the words of the interviewees. The process consists of several stages and this probably means that it involves a certain degree of rewriting. However, compared to *Stuff Happens*, Soans's play could be defined as 'pure verbatim'. I am indebted to my French colleague Cyrielle Garson for this comment.

how performance can bear witness to ‘truth’”.⁶⁶ However, ‘verbatim’ is not the only aesthetic frame suitable for plays about war and terrorism: indeed, “[o]ther responses to war were more indirect and more imaginative”,⁶⁷ but to a certain extent equally ‘intertextual’, since their dramatic texture combines different sources and influences. For instance, in 2006 Simon Stephens’s reaction to the legacy of the Iraq War, entitled *Motortown* (Royal Court), was influenced by Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck* and films such as Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* and Mike Leigh’s *Naked*. A couple of years before, in 2004, Martin Crimp rewrote Sophocles’s *Trachiniae* using the tragic form as a template for his *Cruel and Tender* (Young Vic Theatre, London), and in 2007 Mark Ravenhill opted for theatrical epic in his *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh), a cycle of short plays whose structure is indebted to Crimp’s more experimental production.⁶⁸

11 September 2001 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq were followed in 2008 by another global-scale event which variously inspired many British dramatists, that is to say the worst economic and financial crisis since the Great Depression of 1929. Remarkably, in 2009 at least three plays looked at the turmoil started in the United States and quickly spread all over the world. The first was Steve Thompson’s *Roaring Trade*, which opened at the Soho Theatre, London, on 7 January. This fast-moving satire tests how far City traders can go in the name of competitiveness in order to be successful in the financial world. Premiered on 11 July 2009, Lucy Prebble’s award-

⁶⁶ Jenny Hughes, “Theatre, Performance and the ‘War on Terror’: Ethical and Political Questions Arising from British Theatrical Responses to War and Terrorism”, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17 (2007), pp. 149-164 (p. 151).

⁶⁷ Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, p. 75.

⁶⁸ In his “Introduction” to *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (London: Methuen Drama, 2009 [2008]), Ravenhill underlines that each fragment takes its title from “an existing epic”: *Women of Troy*, *Intolerance*, *Women in Love*, *Fear and Misery*, *War and Peace*, *Yesterday an Incident Occurred*, *Crime and Punishment*, *Love (But I Won’t Do That)*, *The Mikado*, *War of the Worlds*, *Armageddon*, *The Mother*, *Twilight of the Gods*, *Paradise Lost*, *The Odyssey*, *Birth of a Nation*, *Epilogue: Paradise Regained* (p. 5).

winning *Enron* (Minerva Theatre, Chichester) examined the origins of the 2008 crisis by comparing contemporary financial troubles to the collapse of the eponymous American energy company. Later in the year, on 29 September, the National Theatre presented David Hare's *The Power of Yes*, explicitly subtitled *A Dramatist Seeks to Understand the Financial Crisis*.⁶⁹

The international economic turmoil is not the only crisis faced by Western societies in recent years. At a more domestic level, as Middeke, Schnierer, and Sierz observe, “[o]ne of the most important sociological facts in recent Western European history is the collapse of the traditional family unit and the redefinition of family values – both also vital issues on the contemporary stage”.⁷⁰ It is no random fact, therefore, that Noughties playwrights are deeply interested in portraying the disintegration of one of the core values of British identity and cultural cohesion, and one of the pillars of a stable society. The often inward-looking and problematic personal microcosm depicted on stage, in spite of its seemingly claustrophobic quality, reproduces the external environment, and mirrors its complexity and fragmentation. Indeed, polymorphous and often troubled personal identities can be considered as reflections of a hybrid and fractured country which is also vulnerable and confused.

A first group of family dramas includes some emblematic plays about British middle-class family life, that most traditional of private microcosms. Today's dramatists describe this domestic environment principally as an arena of ambivalent relationships where broken lines of communication and tensions prevail. This is well exemplified by Martin Crimp, a master at articulating the deepest anxieties which pervade this suburban microcosm. *The Country* (Royal Court, 2000), for instance, at a simple level is an

⁶⁹ Interestingly, this play also includes reflexivity because it documents the making of the play itself (Hare's character, “The Author”, was played by Anthony Calf).

⁷⁰ Middeke, Schnierer, and Sierz, p. xvii.

ambiguous Pinteresque play about a marriage torn apart by infidelity, lies, and incommunicability. Yet, as the title suggests, it also deals with a very English motif, that is the ‘rural dream’, and briefly hints at a decaying health service. In his plays, Crimp portrays suburban everyday life as a land of dark contrasts: home is far from being a safe shelter and the people you live with seem to be just strangers. A short text entitled *Fewer Emergencies* (Royal Court, 2005) stages a bizarre conversation between anonymous speakers about Bobby, a little boy locked indoors by his overprotective parents, while they are far away from home, and the outside world is upset by riots. There, fear erupts into the domestic sphere and this fact throws light on interrelated nature of the personal and the public. Crimp’s obscure and surreal *The City* (Royal Court, 2008) and Jez Butterworth’s *Parlour Song* (Almeida, 2009) perfectly illustrate suburban dystopias and paranoid personality disorders: the former moves “back and forth between urban collapse and the ruined domestic hearth”,⁷¹ while the latter starts with some apocalyptic images and rapidly turns into a blackly hilarious domestic comedy. While these plays mention children but constantly keep them offstage, Polly Stenham’s astonishing debut *That Face* (Royal Court, 2007) and follow-up *Tusk Tusk* (Royal Court, 2009) analyse middle-class dysfunctional families by focusing on unparented teenagers and describing what happens when they are left alone. A confused nine-year-old child kidnapped by his father is the victim of divorce and custody battles in Mike Bartlett’s *My Child* (Royal Court, 2007), a short play which “draws obliquely on the high profile media campaign of Fathers4Justice and considers the often painful marginalising of fathers in family breakdown”.⁷² This incisive work offers yet another

⁷¹ John Stokes, “The City Inside Me”, *TLS*, 10 April 2009, p. 17.

⁷² Little, p. x.

bleak snapshot of a society made up of broken families in which relationships are based on possessiveness and violence rather than love.

Although mention of a white middle-class microcosm immediately evokes stereotypical Englishness, it is not the only representative setting for plays dealing with (inter)personal issues and, simultaneously, portraying contemporary British society. Various ethnicities equally contribute to produce stage representations and discussions of British national identity and its mutations. Many black and Asian playwrights provide examples of family dramas, vividly describing contrasts between generations and exploring conflicted 'postcolonial' identities.⁷³ Kwame Kwei-Armah's *Elmina's Kitchen* (National Theatre, 2003) was the first play by a black Briton to be staged in the West End (Garrick Theatre) in 2005. Focusing on three generations of black men, this tricultural (African, Caribbean and British) author writes a powerful family tale, which, at the same time, explores several social issues, such as racism, gun crime, personal responsibility, and masculine identity. The theme of male violence also pervades debbie tucker green's *born bad*⁷⁴ (Hampstead Theatre, 2003), a play about power relationships, sexual parental abuse, and gender dynamics within an extremely religious, patriarchal, and inward-looking Afro-Caribbean family. Interestingly, this black family drama has an original and metaphoric structure: instead of featuring a realistic plot and being naturalistically set in a squalid flat, it consists of a series of poetic and fragmentary dialogues and uses the minimalist but powerful stage image of a circle of chairs which,

⁷³ On black and Asian work, see the (first) comprehensive collection *Alternatives Within the Mainstream: British Black and Asian Theatres*, ed. by Dimple Godiwala (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2006).

⁷⁴ This writer's name and the titles of her plays are usually typed in lower-case letters.

once formed, never opens, preventing the family members from communicating with the outside society.⁷⁵

Asian families can be equally dysfunctional, as Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *Behsharam (Shameless)* (Soho Theatre, 2001) demonstrates. This British Sikh author, who has also written for *EastEnders* and *Crossroads*, explores second-generation British-Asian experience, by turning her focus onto an extremely defective Birmingham family. This soap-style family drama is about the deepest obsessions and secrets of a blood-related nucleus consisting of an ineffectual father, his two damaged daughters, and an absent/alcoholic mother. Moreover, Bhatti's play deals with the problem of assimilation and that of racial tensions between black and Asian communities in Britain. In keeping with this, the theme of (in)tolerance within (and without) the inward-looking Asian community is the core issue of Alia Bano's award-winning *Shades* (Royal Court, 2009), a 'rom-com' about a modern Muslim girl's quest for Mr Right. Sabrina's 'alternative' family consists of her gay Bengali best friend Zain and his white partner Mark, and when she falls in love with Reza, a boy with strict religious beliefs, his family's narrow-mindedness constantly interferes with their mutual attraction. Bano's play is an entertaining picture of contemporary Islamic Britain, a text which humorously describes what it means to be a (single) Muslim girl in today's multicultural London.

Middeke, Schnierer, and Sierz assert that domestic plays staging

the family in crisis connect[] with issues of psychology, dissolving identities, madness, trauma, and especially the concern with gender and gender-performativity. Many playwrights have made it clear that gender identity is not an ontological category, but that it is achieved through institutionalised repetitions of physical acts. This stance, theoretically elucidated by Judith Butler, underlies, for instance, the way that the construction of both femininity and masculinity appears in contemporary new writing.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ See Amelia Howe Kritzer, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing 1995-2005* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 118-20.

⁷⁶ Middeke, Schnierer, and Sierz, p. xvii.

Once again, the family can be considered an emblematic microcosm which, in this case, provides a snapshot of the changing nature of gender roles in British society. By reference to the cultural theorist and sociologist Stuart Hall, Linda McDowell observes that – since the revolutionary ‘Swinging Sixties’ –

the rapid pace of technological change, the attitudes and values that regulate social and sexual life, definitions of masculine and feminine identities, the challenges to the literary canon and other forms of ‘high culture’, among other changes, have produced both cultural democratization and greater uncertainty and unpredictability in British society.⁷⁷

On the one hand, we can affirm that women have never been more economically and socially independent. Notably, their participation in the labour market has increased over the past few decades and their subsequent emancipation has destabilised the traditional male breadwinner family model. On the other hand, paradoxically, this seeming democratization does not mean that gender stereotypes and hierarchies have disappeared. In today’s Britain, gender equality is just a distant mirage and gender wars are fought everyday both at work and at home, as contemporary playwrights demonstrate. Stella Feehily’s *Dreams of Violence* (Soho Theatre, 2009), for instance, is a witty tragicomedy about Hildy, a politically committed woman in her forties accused by her son of being a symbol of “‘the eighties’ gone wrong”,⁷⁸ who is better at running an organisation helping low-paid workers than at coping with her troubled domestic life. Because of its exploration of the issues of love and responsibility, as well as a culture’s inevitable breakdown, *Dreams of Violence* seems to have much in common with Alexi Kaye Campbell’s *Apologia* (Bush Theatre, 2009). Indeed, the protagonist of this sharp play, Kristin Miller, is a brilliant feminist art historian who attended the anti-war

⁷⁷ Linda McDowell, “Changing Cultures of Work: Employment, Gender, and Lifestyle”, in *British Cultural Studies*, ed. by David Morley and Kevin Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 343-60 (p. 344).

⁷⁸ Stella Feehily, *Dreams of Violence* (Nick Hern Books: London, 2009), p. 64.

demonstration in Grosvenor Square and manned the barricades in Paris in 1968. Her birthday becomes an occasion for her two grown-up sons to accuse her of failing to mention them in her newly published autobiography, and being a dreadful and uncaring mother who puts herself before family ties. Kristen is thus forced to face the past and the cost of her political idealism, which have rendered her unsuitable for a traditional maternal role.

Contrasts between generations/eras pervade plays dealing with male homosexuality, gay identity, and lifestyle. Mark Ravenhill's *Mother Clap's Molly House* (National Theatre, 2001), an iconically gay drama which explores the polymorphous nature of sexual identity, moves between a brothel in eighteenth-century London, where gay men meet, engage, use female names/clothes, and create 'alternative' families, and a raunchy party organised by their twenty-first century counterparts. Arguably, Ravenhill's contemporary gay characters become metaphors for the wider British society, where people enjoy sexual freedom, but consumerism, selfishness, and hedonism prevail over true feelings. In a similar way, Alexi Kaye Campbell's award-winning *The Pride* (Royal Court, 2008) jumps from 1958 to 2008 and back, analysing changing attitudes to sexual identity and intimacy. This touching play examines a complex love triangle in the fear-ridden Fifties and the in the liberal Noughties, to deliver an important message about sexual politics, repression, liberation, and the possibility of change.

Lesbian drama is equally concerned with the issue of identity. To mention just one example, Bryony Lavery's bittersweet *A Wedding Story* (Birmingham/Sphinx, 2000) explores two different love bonds: Peter and Evelyn's painfully disintegrating marriage and their daughter Sally's same-sex relationship with Grace, a woman she

meets at a wedding reception. A well-established lesbian feminist playwright, Lavery ironically reverses wedding clichés and, simultaneously, focuses on the question of the self from a variety of points of view by exploring liminal themes such as illness and displacement.

Although contemporary British drama covers a wide range of timely issues related both to the public and the personal, in a 2006 article on the past six decades of British theatre Billington complained of a lack of interest in the environment:

On one topic [...] it [British theatre] has remained tragically silent: the environment. While a government scientist, David King, warns that global warming poses a greater threat than terrorism, theatre remains outside the debate. [...] I don't care whether it's fact or fiction. I'd have thought someone somewhere must have something to say about the future of our planet. Always assuming it has one.⁷⁹

Today we can affirm with certainty that contemporary playwrights have learnt Billington's lesson: the ecological crisis has recently become one of the central concerns of new writing for British theatre. From different perspectives, writers have tackled this topic affecting the nation and – at the same time – the whole planet. Apocalyptic images of a riot-torn country afflicted by the consequences of climate change (“Essex underwater and Dorset dissolving into the sea like sherbet”⁸⁰) contribute to create the dystopian backdrop to Lucy Kirkwood's farce *Tinderbox*, which received its initial performance at the Bush in 2008. First staged at the same theatre in 2009, Steve Waters's *The Contingency Plan* is a double bill of (complementary but autonomous) plays painting “a vision of Britain submerged in floods and floating to oblivion”.⁸¹ Another young writer, Duncan Macmillan, carefully examines controversial themes such as global warming and pollution. The young protagonists of his *Lungs* – which

⁷⁹ Billington, “All Our Yesterdays”.

⁸⁰ Lucy Kirkwood, *Tinderbox* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2008), p. 26.

⁸¹ Michael Coveney, “Brave New World”, *Independent*, 30 July 2009, pp. 14-15 (p. 15).

opened at the Studio Theatre, Washington DC, USA, in 2011 – express their obsession with the planet’s conditions through verbal iterations of ecological motifs. Moreover, in November 2014 the Royal Court premiered *2071: The World We’ll Leave Our Grandchildren*, a play co-written by Duncan Macmillan and the University College London’s climate change scientist and former director of the Science Museum Chris Rapley, in co-operation with Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg.

While a number of dramas offer apocalyptic statements and gloomy visions of the future, Johnny Byron, the protagonist of Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* (Royal Court Theatre, 2009), “has seen the way the world has gone and wants to awaken the giants of the plain and the ghosts of the hinterland”, suggesting that “[t]he nation needs re-birthing”.⁸² Probably one of the most emblematic plays of the early twenty-first century, *Jerusalem* constitutes a symbolic arena where tradition and innovation clash, and where a supposedly glorious past is engulfed in a brutal, profit-driven present. Through a web of intertextual references, Butterworth rewrites and (re)stages the contemporary troubles of Englishness by conjuring up nostalgia for a vanished era, as well as relentlessly dismantling its claims.

To conclude this section on early twenty-first-century drama, I would like to highlight that, despite its socio-realist/naturalistic vocation, British theatre has also provided its audiences with intriguingly experimental plays, whose deconstructive fragmentation veers towards postmodern and, in some cases, even postdramatic landscapes.⁸³ In his thought-provoking essay “Exit the Author”, Dan Rebellato argues that the openness of works such as Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis* (posthumously staged

⁸² Coveney, p. 15.

⁸³ On “theatre after drama”, see Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. and with an Introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006).

at the Royal Court in 2000) seems to coincide with a retreat of the playwright.⁸⁴ However, this authorial withdrawal and seeming precariousness does not mean that a traditionally “writer-centred theatre has finally begun to adopt the principles of poststructuralism and that we are watching authors dissolve into their texts”.⁸⁵ By contrast, Rebellato wants to stress the potentiality of authorship as “a ground for aesthetic and ethical questioning that stages the death of the author as a way of profoundly investigating theatrical meaning and our capacity for fundamental political change”.⁸⁶ Notably, these reflections on the writer simultaneously stimulate a reassessment of the audience’s role in a social art form which is intrinsically linked to the offstage reality.⁸⁷

4. REWRITING FOR THE STAGE

As the previous sections have illustrated – since the Second World War, British theatre has closely mirrored political, societal, and cultural mutations. Following in this tradition, the early twenty-first century has provided a particularly fertile ground for the increasingly acute self-questioning (not least about national identities) besetting contemporary British culture. The critic Michael Coveney argues that, in times of crisis, the National Theatre has reacquired its role as an arena for public debate, drawing a telling parallel between the contemporary British stage and the ancient Greek one:

⁸⁴ Dan Rebellato mentions various plays staging (in different ways) the death of the author, including Tim Crouch’s *The Author* (Royal Court Theatre, 2009); David Greig’s *San Diego* (Edinburgh International Festival, 2003); Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* (Royal Court, 1997) and *Fewer Emergencies* (2005); Ravenhill’s *pool (no water)* (Drum Theatre Plymouth, 2006) and *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 2007); Simon Stephens’s *Pornography* (Schauspielhannover, 2007), etc.

⁸⁵ Dan Rebellato, “Exit the Author”, in *Contemporary British Theatre: Breaking New Ground*, ed. by Vicky Angelaki (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 9-31 (pp. 11-12).

⁸⁶ Rebellato, p. 12.

⁸⁷ See Angelaki, “Introduction”, in *Contemporary British Theatre*, pp. 1-8 (p. 4).

When the National Theatre opened its doors on the South Bank in 1976, one of the longest-running poster campaigns proclaimed, “The National Theatre Is Yours”. Nobody really believed that. But in the current climate, aided by the astute programming of artistic director Nicholas Hytner, it’s almost as if we turn to the NT for assistance in deconstructing our contemporary woes, just as the Greeks did in the ancient theatres of Athens.⁸⁸

If Coveney suggests that the social function of today’s stage harks back to that of the theatre of classical antiquity, the ‘therapeutic’ power of this medium is merely one aspect of the multifaceted relationship between contemporary British theatre and its Greek (and – to a lesser extent – Roman) antecedents. Several modern-dress productions of classical tragedies and more or less radical rewritings inspired by ancient texts have been staged in Britain (as well as all over the world) in the last decades. The contemporary renaissance and revision of a dramatic genre “reputedly first developed by Thespis in the Attic deme of Icarion”⁸⁹ has been enthusiastically hailed by Edith Hall, one of Britain’s most distinguished classicists working within the field of reception studies. In her Introduction to the volume *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (2004), co-edited with Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley, Hall celebrates the extraordinary presence of Hellenic drama on the world’s stages:

More Greek tragedy has been performed in the last thirty years than at any point in history since Greco-Roman antiquity. Translated, adapted, staged, sung, danced, parodied, filmed, *enacted*, Greek tragedy has proved magnetic to writers and directors searching for new ways in which to pose questions to contemporary society and to push back the boundaries of theatre. The mythical, dysfunctional, conflicted world portrayed in the archetypal plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides has become one of the most important cultural and

⁸⁸ Coveney, p. 15.

⁸⁹ Mark Griffith, “‘Telling the Tale’: A Performing Tradition from Homer to Pantomime”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, ed. by Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 13-35 (p. 21).

aesthetic prisms through which the real, dysfunctional, conflicted world of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries has refracted its own image.⁹⁰

The book's title refers to Richard Schechner's *Dionysus in 69*, "a socially, politically, and above all theatrically radical"⁹¹ appropriation of Euripides's *Bacchae*, which premiered at the Performing Garage, New York City, on 6 June 1968. Coinciding with a renewal of interest in Greek tragedy, the years 1968-69 constitute a turning point in the history of the reception of ancient theatre, a landmark before which, as Hall observes, this genre was rarely staged. Hall argues that the main reasons for this phenomenon are of a socio-political kind:

[t]his reawakening was just one result of the seismic political and cultural shifts marking the end of the 1960s. Greek tragedy began to be performed on a quantitatively far greater scale, from more radical political perspectives, and in more adventurous performance styles than it had been before.⁹²

Even if she admits that some Senecan tragedies have been successfully revived, Hall notes a remarkable predominance of Hellenic plays on the contemporary stage: "the ancient European texts which have offered the public imagination of the last three decades overwhelmingly the most important theatrical material have been Greek tragedies".⁹³ In addition, she points out that during the Nineties the Greeks conquered London's performance repertoire and – on some occasions – even defeated the most emblematic British playwright, the (seemingly irreplaceable) Bard of Avon: "the sheer number of productions has occasionally made these ancient plays rival the English-

⁹⁰ Edith Hall, "Introduction", in *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, ed. by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1-46 (p. 2) [original emphasis].

⁹¹ Hall, "Introduction", p. 1.

⁹² Hall, "Introduction", p. 1.

⁹³ Hall, "Introduction", p. 5.

language classics of the repertoire. In the first half of 1995 more Euripides was performed in London than any other playwright, including Shakespeare”.⁹⁴

Although Hall’s volume is essential reading for anyone interested in Greek tragedy at the dawn of the twenty-first century, *Dionysus since 69* considers the Hellenic revival primarily as “an international, even worldwide phenomenon”.⁹⁵ As the reference list of its last chapter shows, the contributors to the book examined contemporary productions and revisions of Greek tragedies staged, screened, choreographed, and broadcast in various countries from 1659 to 2003, without a specifically national perspective. In the following year, however, Hall published an extensive study, co-written with Fiona Macintosh, dealing with the reception of Greek tragedy in Great Britain between 1660 and World War I. Focusing on British socio-cultural history, *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660-1914*⁹⁶ is obviously more relevant to English Studies, which – as has been said in the Preface – is the area of study to which this dissertation belongs. Unfortunately, however, stopping just before the outbreak of World War I, the book by Hall and Macintosh does not include *contemporary* British rewritings of Greek (and Roman) tragedies.

While the reception of classical material in today’s British theatre is a somewhat neglected area of research, other geo-cultural dimensions have been more fortunate: “[a]ttempts have been made by other scholars, with varying degrees of success, to document the performance history of Greek tragedy in some other countries”.⁹⁷ Indeed, the remarkable presence of Greek tragedy on the contemporary stages of places such as

⁹⁴ Hall, “Introduction”, p. 5.

⁹⁵ Hall, “Introduction”, p. 2.

⁹⁶ *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660-1914*, ed. by Edith Hall and Fiona Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁹⁷ Hall and Macintosh, eds., “Preface”, in *Greek Tragedy and the British Theatre 1660-1914*, pp. vii-xxii (p. vii).

Germany, North America, Ireland, and Africa has been examined from a variety of points of view with stimulating results.⁹⁸

If British classicists do not seem to be interested in the influence of Greek and Roman classics on contemporary British theatre – or, at least, not interested enough to write a monograph on this topic –, scholars from English and Theatre Studies are equally silent about the dialogue between antiquity and contemporaneity in Britain. Apart from some journal articles and book sections offering overviews⁹⁹ or more or less detailed comparative close readings of the classical text and its English-language rewriting,¹⁰⁰ this doctoral dissertation is the first attempt – to my knowledge – at investigating the socio-political role of contemporary appropriations of ancient tragedies

⁹⁸ Hellmut Flashar's *Inszenierung der Antike: das griechische Drama auf der Bühne der Neuzeit 1585-1991* (Munich: Beck, 1991) focuses on the reception of Greek tragedy in Germany, while Karelisa V. Hartigan's *Greek Tragedy on the American Stage: Ancient Drama in the Commercial Theatre, 1882-1994* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), and Helene P. Foley's *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), analyse North American productions. Remarkably, in 2015 Kathryn Boshier, Fiona Macintosh, Justine McConnell, and Patrice Rankine co-edited *The Oxford Handbook of Greek Tragedy in the Americas*, Oxford University Press. The reception of Hellenic tragedy in contemporary Ireland has been extensively explored: in 2002 Kelly Younger published *Irish Adaptations of Greek Tragedies: Dionysus in Ireland* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press), in 2002 Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton co-edited *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy* (London: Methuen), and in 2008 Katherine Anne Hennessey submitted her doctoral thesis *Memorable Barbarities and National Myths: Ancient Greek Tragedy and Irish Epic in Modern Irish Theatre* (University of Notre Dame), available at <http://etd.nd.edu/ETD-db/theses/available/etd-03042008-104843/unrestricted/HennesseyKA032008.pdf>, last accessed 18 December 2015. Interestingly, the fruitful relationship between contemporary African drama and Greek tragedy is studied in Kevin J. Wetmore's volume *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Classical Greek Tragedy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2002), Aktina Stathaki's electronically published PhD thesis, *Adaptation and Performance of Greek Drama in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (University of Toronto, 2009), available at http://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/19235/6/Stathaki_Aktina_200911_PhD_Thesis.pdf, last accessed 18 December 2015, and Astrid Van Weyenberg's book *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013).

⁹⁹ For instance, see Anette Pankratz, "Greek to Us? Appropriations of Myths in Contemporary British and Irish Drama", in *Crossing Borders – Intercultural Drama and Theatre at the Turn of the Millennium* (Contemporary Drama in English 8), ed. by Bernhard Reitz and Alyce von Rothkirch (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001), pp. 151-163.

¹⁰⁰ On Sarah Kane's radical version of Seneca's *Phaedra*, for example, see Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier, "Re-writing Seneca: Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*", in *Crossing Borders – Intercultural Drama and Theatre at the Turn of the Millennium*, pp. 165-72, and Anja Müller-Wood, "The Fatal Effects of *Phaedra's Love*: Sarah Kane", in *Myth and Violence in the Contemporary Female Text*, ed. by Sanja Bahun-Radunović and V.G. Julie Rajan (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 97-112, two contributions written by English Studies scholars interested in contemporary British theatre (like Pankratz).

in today's Britain. Even, Sean Carney's *The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary English Tragedy* (2013) in fact aims to demonstrate how the idea of the tragic permeates the political output of seven contemporary English playwrights, but does not focus explicitly (or exclusively) on rewritings.¹⁰¹

As far as theatrical historiography is concerned, it is worth considering that contemporary productions and new versions of ancient tragedies are not a central concern of comprehensive studies of post-war British drama. At best, some of them are simply mentioned in passing or – in the case of radical reworkings – considered as a spin-off of new writing. However, in the last chapter of *State of the Nation*, Michael Billington has perceptively isolated a definite classical strand during the Blair era: “The Iraq war made Greek tragedy, and Euripides especially, essential. Both the illegality of the war and its disastrous aftermath also turned political theatre, in all its manifold forms, into a necessity rather than an optional extra”.¹⁰² Billington also examined classical war theatre in a couple of articles published in 2003-4.¹⁰³

Despite the lack of specific critical sources, an ever-expanding bibliography on tragedy¹⁰⁴ and its performance¹⁰⁵ is available, as well as several studies on classical

¹⁰¹ The group of contemporary ‘tragedians’ analysed by Carney includes David Hare, Howard Barker, Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane, and Jez Butterworth.

¹⁰² Michael Billington, *State of the Nation*, p. 392.

¹⁰³ Michael Billington, “Drama Out of a Crisis”, *Guardian*, 10 April 2003 (available at <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/apr/10/theatre.artsfeatures>, last accessed 20 December 2015), and, even more relevant, “Terror of Modern Times Sets the Stage for Greek Tragedy”, *Guardian*, 19 June 2004 (available at <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2004/jun/19/theatre.iraq/>, last accessed 20 December 2015).

¹⁰⁴ For instance, see Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). On tragedy's contemporary reassessment and legacy, see *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. by Rita Felski (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); *Tragedy in Transition*, ed. by Sarah Annes Brown and Catherine Silverstone (Malden (MA), Oxford, and Carlton (Victoria): Blackwell, 2007).

¹⁰⁵ On tragedy in performance, see Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); Simon Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007); David Wiles, *Mask and Performance in Greek Tragedy: From Ancient Festival to Modern Experimentation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); *Theorising*

reception,¹⁰⁶ intertextuality,¹⁰⁷ adaptation,¹⁰⁸ postmodern rewritings,¹⁰⁹ (inter)cultural translations and appropriations,¹¹⁰ remediation,¹¹¹ and women's rewritings.¹¹² I will thus draw on heterogeneous material, and various literary, critical and cultural categories – as elaborated and constantly revised by contemporary theorists – will underpin my research and add to its topicality. Multifarious theories will contribute to frame and sustain a study which aims to explore and question the politics of re-(en)visioning ancient tragedy in contemporary Britain, as well as the complex relationship between new writing and rewriting for the stage in a country that is both “receptive and resistant”¹¹³ to the classics.

Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice, ed. by Edith Hall and Stephe Harrop (London: Duckworth, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ Just to mention a few seminal studies, see Lorna Hardwick, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* (London: Duckworth, 2000) and her *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); *Classics and the Uses of Reception*, ed. by Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas (Malden (MA), Oxford, and Carlton (Victoria): Blackwell, 2006); *Classics in the Modern World: A Democratic Turn?*, ed. by Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ For instance, see Allen.

¹⁰⁸ On adaptation theory, see Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006) and Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013[2006]). More specifically, see Margherita Laera, *Reaching Athens: Community, Democracy and Other Mythologies in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013) and her *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat* (London: Methuen, 2014).

¹⁰⁹ For instance, see Christian Moraru, *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001).

¹¹⁰ See Diego Saglia, “Modes of Transit: Cultural Translation, Appropriation, and Intercultural Transfers”, in *Bridging Cultures: Intercultural Mediation in Literature, Linguistics and the Arts*, ed. by Ciara Hogan, Nadine Rentel, and Stephanie Schwerter (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2012), pp. 93-112. On theatre translation and relocation, see *Moving Target: Theatre Translation and Cultural Relocation*, ed. by Carole-Anne Upton (Manchester and Northampton, MA: St Jerome Publishing, 2000) and *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture*, ed. by Hanna Scolnicov and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹¹¹ See *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, ed. by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (Cambridge (MA) and London: MIT Press, 1999). On cinematic transpositions, see Michelakis Pantelis, *Greek Tragedy on Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹¹² See Elizabeth Sakellaridou, “Feminist Heterologies: Contemporary British Women Playwrights and the Rewrite of Myth and History”, in *English Studies in Transition*, ed. by Robert Clark and Piero Boitani (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 306-19, Frances Babbage, *Re-Visioning Myth: Modern and Contemporary Drama by Women* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), and the already mentioned volume *Myth and Violence in the Contemporary Female Text*.

¹¹³ Sakellaridou, p. 313.

THEORY I:

THE POETICS OF REWRITING

1. LITERATURE AS A (DYNAMIC) SYSTEM: THE URGE TO REWRITE

Peter Widdowson argued that, in recent times, ‘literature’ has turned into an extremely controversial notion:

By the late-twentieth century, ‘literature’, as a concept and as a term, has become so problematical – either through ideological contamination as the high cultural ‘Canon’, or, conversely, through demystification and deconstruction by radical critical theory – that it approaches the unuseable, at least without contorted apologetics”.¹

As the (sub)title of the first chapter of *Literature* suggests, he is convinced that this “heavily naturalised term as it appears in current usage and common parlance”² can be defined only through what he intriguingly calls “[s]ome (non-)definitions”.³ Paradoxically, the idea of literature seems to exist exclusively *in absentia*: “Perhaps the only way to represent it, as *passé* presence or determinate absence, is ‘under erasure’”.⁴ However, despite the slipperiness and inadequacy of a term/notion that (dis)appears *sous rature*, Widdowson stresses the pivotal role played by literature and its “need to be rescued from itself: to be *re-accredited* – rather than shamefacedly subsumed [...] within general concepts of ‘writing’, ‘rhetoric’, ‘discourse’ or ‘cultural production’”.⁵ Moreover, quoting Terry Eagleton, Widdowson claims that nowadays the *specific* place

¹ Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 2.

² Widdowson, p. 3.

³ Widdowson, p. 1.

⁴ Widdowson, p. 2 [original emphasis].

⁵ Widdowson, p. 2 [original emphasis].

of literature within culture must be accurately re-defined, denouncing the vagueness of inclusive categories. In Eagleton's words, "Literature must indeed be re-situated within the field of general cultural production; but each mode of such production demands a semiology of its own, which is not conflatable with some universal 'cultural' discourse".⁶ It follows that a re-located realm of literature needs to be considered and analysed as a distinct sign-system rather than a generic and neutral notion.

In the mid-Seventies, the Italian philologist and semiotician Maria Corti anticipated this idea of literature as a codified communication system ("passibile di strutturazione a diversi piani e livelli").⁷ It is worth considering how her theoretical formulation is permeated with intertextual discourse, one of the central concerns of this doctoral dissertation. Indeed, as she observed, the peculiarity of a literary system lies in the unique relationships between the phenomena that compose it, so that each element can be defined through this interdependence: "La *specificità* [...] della letteratura dipende dall'esistenza di rapporti particolari e insostituibili, spesso laboriosi, dei fenomeni letterari tra di loro".⁸ From a diachronic perspective, literature is thus characterised by an ongoing interplay between fixed codes and textual variations. Far from being a static system, for Corti, literature becomes a sort of arena of tensions and even disruptive impulses, "di forze centripete e centrifughe che si producono nel rapporto dialettico fra ciò che aspira a persistere intatto per forza di inerzia e ciò che avanza con impeto di rottura e di trasformazione".⁹ Notably, her notions of literature as a system of signs and as a field of tensions (*campo di tensioni*) fruitfully intermingle: "alla prima si collega l'idea che ogni testo ha *un posto* nella letteratura, in quanto entra

⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Verso, 1978 [NLB, 1975]), p. 166.

⁷ Maria Corti, *Principi della comunicazione letteraria*, 6th edn (Milano: Bompiani, 1997 [1976]), p. 14.

⁸ Corti, p. 16 [original emphasis].

⁹ Corti, p. 19.

in una rete di rapporti con gli altri testi; alla seconda l'idea che il posto è mutabile, al limite perdibile".¹⁰ Within this literary circuit, texts oscillate between placement and displacement, affiliation and separation, tradition and innovation. If, on the one hand, this system is destabilised by disintegrating forces ("[v]iolenze dirompenti, avventure disgregative"),¹¹ on the other hand, these canon-shattering impulses are counterbalanced by the inherent *iterability* of literature and, in a larger sense, culture (in Corti's words, "ristrutturazioni, ricreazione di un sistema di attese, recuperi (la cultura, si sa, è iterativa)").¹²

From an English Studies perspective, this fascinating textual interconnectedness and the system-like structure of literature and culture have been underlined by various scholars. For instance, in the Introduction to his study *Intertextuality* written for Routledge's New Critical Idiom series, Graham Allen states that

[w]orks of literature, after all, are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of literature. The systems, codes and traditions of other art forms and of culture in general are also crucial to the meaning of a work of literature. Texts, whether they be literary or non-literary, are viewed by modern theorists as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. They are what theorists now call intertextual.¹³

Even more authoritatively, in his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton himself points out the interrelation of every single (textual) unit within (and without) the literary system: "every word, phrase or segment is a reworking of other writings which precede or surround the individual work".¹⁴

As is well known, the first manifestations of the intrinsic iterability of literature hark back to the classical world: "Since antiquity, when rewriting was both an

¹⁰ Corti, p. 20 [original emphasis].

¹¹ Corti, p. 17.

¹² Corti, p. 17.

¹³ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 2nd edn, (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011 [2000]), p. 1.

¹⁴ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 138.

apprentice's routine and a way to mature achievements through *imitatio auctorum*, literary rewriting has been going on continuously".¹⁵ If reception within antiquity was a significant and "multi-faceted"¹⁶ literary and cultural practice, this impulse to remake has become obsessive in our postmodern era. In this age of recycling, every cultural product seems to be an adapted version of a previous artefact. It is no surprise that this postmodern 'cloning' and its seeming lack of originality has been criticized and negatively defined as a parasitic activity: "[f]or many theorists and critics, the Postmodern era can seem one in which reproduction takes over from authentic production".¹⁷ Among the most eminent detractors, Terry Eagleton and Frederic Jameson (often drawing on the philosophical work of Jean Baudrillard) vigorously attacked postmodern ideological and cultural relativism during the Eighties and Nineties.¹⁸

Far from dealing with those neutral practices that Jameson would call "blank parodies", this study builds on this complex theoretical debate in order to focus on the poetics and politics of a selection of contemporary British reworkings of classical tragedies, and to demonstrate how, as Moraru suggests, "rewriting determines not only a remolding of a certain literary matrix, but, by means of this very retextualization, also a revision – critical retelling – of those cultural tales".¹⁹

¹⁵ Christian Moraru, *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 6.

¹⁶ Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 12.

¹⁷ Allen, p. 177.

¹⁸ See Allen, pp. 177-9, and Moraru, pp. 168-73.

¹⁹ Moraru, p. xiii.

2. INTERTEXTUALITY: THE HISTORY OF A SLIPPERY TERM

Intertextuality is one of those controversial notions belonging to literary and cultural theory which stubbornly resist precise definition. As Allen observes in his seminal guide to intertextuality, this often misinterpreted concept “is defined so variously that it is, currently, akin to such terms as ‘the Imagination’, ‘history’, or ‘Postmodernism’: terms which are, to employ a phrase from the work of the US critic Harold Bloom, underdetermined in meaning and overdetermined in figuration”.²⁰ Therefore, even if it is a pivotal notion in twentieth-century theoretical debate, intertextuality “cannot be evoked in an uncomplicated manner”.²¹ Well aware of the impossibility to formulate an exact definition of this frequently (ab)used term (“[s]uch a project would be doomed to failure”),²² Allen suggests that “[w]hat is required is for us to return to the term’s history and to remind ourselves of how and why it has taken on its current meanings and applications”.²³ In keeping with his advice, this section will attempt to reconstruct the main stages and renditions of intertextual theory, with special focus on Gérard Genette’s terminology, which will be consistently employed throughout this dissertation.

2.1 Reworking Theory: Kristeva Re-reads/Re-writes Saussure and Bakhtin

It is interesting to note how the origins of a theory stressing the intrinsic interdependence of textual artefacts lie in the fruitful re-(en)visioning and combination

²⁰ Allen, p. 2.

²¹ Allen, p. 2.

²² Allen, p. 2.

²³ Allen, p. 2.

of previous theoretical discourses. In the mid- to late Sixties, the Bulgarian-born linguist, philosopher, and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva coined the French term *intertextualité* and articulated her own theory around this concept by rereading and rewriting Saussurean linguistics and Bakhtinian thought.²⁴ Indeed, Kristeva blended Saussure's interest in the relational nature of language (conceived as a system of differences) with the idea of the dialogic advanced by the Russian theorist, who at that time was still little known in the Francophone world. Although her focus on textual features may seem more abstract than her precursor's emphasis on the social situatedness of any utterance, what Bakhtin and Kristeva have in common is "an insistence that texts cannot be separated from the larger cultural or social textuality out of which they are constructed".²⁵

Significantly, Kristeva's stimulating reworking of Saussurean and Bakhtinian theoretical notions "occurred at a specific historical moment":²⁶ the revolutionary context of late Sixties France affected and promoted the shift from dogmatic structuralist theory to the protean plurality of poststructuralism. As Allen points out, this move "is often characterized as one in which assertions of objectivity, scientific rigour, methodological stability and other highly rationalistic-sounding terms are replaced by an emphasis on uncertainty, indeterminacy, incommunicability, subjectivity, desire, pleasure and play".²⁷ Starting from Bakhtin's "dynamisation du structuralisme",²⁸ Kristeva – one of the most influential protagonists of this transition – disrupts the idea

²⁴ See Julia Kristeva's essays "Le texte clos" and "Le mot, le dialogue et le roman" in her *Σημειωτική: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 1969), pp. 52-112.

²⁵ Allen, p. 35.

²⁶ Allen, p. 15.

²⁷ Allen, p. 3.

²⁸ Kristeva, "Le mot, le dialogue et le roman", p. 83.

of a unified and stable meaning and throws light on the polyphony of textual productivity.

2.2 The Pleasure of Unmaking the Text: Barthes

In his *Intertextuality* (1991), the German critic Heinrich F. Plett affirms that Kristeva and Barthes, together with Bakhtin and Derrida, belong to that group of intertextual scholars whom he defines as “‘the progressives’”²⁹. As Moraru points out, “[t]hey combine semiotics, Freudianism, Marxism, and a certain postmetaphysical, radical philosophy to open up the concept of intertext and subsequent practices as to suggest how literary redeployments revisit various paradigms of social life”.³⁰ With the exception of Bakhtin, they gravitated around the French journal *Tel Quel*, which gave “that often divergent set of theories a common site, a place to perform ‘writing-thinking’”.³¹ Despite – or probably thanks to – her foreign origins, Kristeva’s (ex-centric) figure was pivotal: her disruptive ideas and stimulating critique of the stability of signification had a strong impact on the *Tel Quel* group. Remarkably, her innovative work was considered “unsettling”³² by Barthes. In his words, “Julia Kristeva change la place des choses : elle détruit toujours *le dernier préjugé*, celui dont on croyait pouvoir se rassurer et s’enorgueillir”.³³ Barthes was deeply fascinated by her challenging viewpoint and, in keeping with it, completely rejected the idea of “the ‘natural’, stable meaning and unquestionable truth”.³⁴

²⁹ Quoted in Moraru, p. 32.

³⁰ Moraru, p. 32.

³¹ Allen, p. 30.

³² Allen, p. 30.

³³ Roland Barthes, *Le Bruissement de la langue* (Paris: Seuil, 1984), p. 197 [original emphasis].

³⁴ Allen, p. 59.

Thus, drawing on the ideas of Kristeva and Derrida, Barthes articulated his own theory, focusing on the tension between stability and security and the distinction between ‘work’ and ‘text’. In his opinion, the (radically plural) ‘text’ (that is the “material inscription”³⁵ which “secures the guarantee of the written object”³⁶) gives stability to the ‘work’. For Barthes, if the ‘text’ is the signifier, the ‘work’ is the signified. As Allen points out, this (inter)textual theory shows how “the text not only sets going a plurality of meanings but is also woven out of numerous discourses and spun from already existent meaning”.³⁷ Far from being a definable object with an ‘inside’/‘outside’, “the ‘text’ is that which is potentially released within a ‘work’ and yet that which exists *between* that text and other texts. It is intertextual to the core and, in Barthes’s hands, it foregrounds dramatically the productive role of the reader”.³⁸

The relationship between (re)reading and (re)writing and the ongoing struggle between ‘doxa’ (cultural cliché which becomes natural)³⁹ and ‘para-doxa’ (its disruptive antithesis) fruitfully intermingle in Barthes’s work. In his famous essay “The Death of the Author”, the French theorist argues that only an authorial withdrawal can guarantee the plurality of textual interpretation, unleashing the infinite nuances of meaning of a “tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture”.⁴⁰ Barthes’s intertextuality is above all a cultural matter: he is more interested in fighting stereotypes

³⁵ Allen, p. 59.

³⁶ Roland Barthes, “Theory of the Text”, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. by Robert Young (London and New York: Routledge, 1981), pp. 31-47 (p. 32).

³⁷ Allen, p. 65.

³⁸ Allen, p. 66 [original emphasis].

³⁹ “Car chaque parler (chaque fiction) combat pour l’hégémonie ; s’il a le pouvoir pour lui, il s’étend partout dans le courant et le quotidien de la vie sociale, il devient *doxa*, nature : c’est le parler prétendûment [*sic*] apolitique des hommes politiques, des agents de l’État, c’est celui de la presse, de la radio, de la télévision, c’est celui de la conversation ; mais même hors du pouvoir, contre lui, la rivalité renaît, les parlers se fractionnent, luttent entre eux”. Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), p. 47 [original emphasis].

⁴⁰ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”, in *Image – Music – Text*, Essays selected and trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), pp. 142-8 (p. 146).

than in finding sources. For him, textual analysis “tries to say no longer *from where* the text comes (historical criticism), nor even *how* it is made (structural analysis), but how it is unmade, how it explodes, disseminates – by what coded paths it *goes off*”.⁴¹

2.3 Genette’s *Relations Palimpsestueuses*

If Kristeva and Barthes are ‘progressive’ intertextual scholars, Plett calls Gérard Genette, Michael Riffaterre, Harold Bloom and others “‘the traditionalists’”.⁴² As Moraru makes clear, these theorists

deal with intertextuality [...] chiefly as a literary phenomenon (Plett 4-5). They make use of structural and historical poetics, theory of genres, stylistics, and, not least, comparative literature methodology. They have put together a model for tackling intertextuality as a process shaping *literary* (aesthetic) production and response, have cataloged interliterary transformations, and have traced, with great display of erudition, the historical fluctuations of categories thus identified.⁴³

While a ‘progressive’ scholar such as Barthes is fascinated by the capacity of the text to explode, releasing a plurality of meanings, the ‘traditionalist’ Genette aims, in a more analytical and pragmatic fashion, “to place any specific example of textuality within a viable system”.⁴⁴ In other words, Genette’s desire for “*rearrangement*” seems the exact antithesis of Barthes’s penchant for “*dissemination*”.⁴⁵ However, despite the obvious differences between (seemingly opposite) approaches, it is important to bear in mind that a rigorous distinction between “distinctly poststructuralist and distinctly

⁴¹ Barthes, “*The Struggle with the Angel: Textual Analysis of Genesis 32: 22-32*”, in *Image – Music – Text*, pp. 125-41 (pp. 126-7) [original emphasis].

⁴² Quoted in Moraru, p. 32.

⁴³ Moraru, pp. 32-33 [original emphasis].

⁴⁴ Allen, p. 99.

⁴⁵ Allen, p. 99 [original emphasis].

structuralist” versions of intertextual theory “would be a mistake”.⁴⁶ For Allen, it is possible simply to identify what he calls “a structuralist – [...] a more circumscribed – rendition of intertextuality in a number of theorists working from the late 1960s onwards”,⁴⁷ especially Genette and Riffaterre.

Genette is best known for his *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (1982), in which he offers the powerful metaphorical image of an ancient document wherein a new layer of writing has been superimposed on the (partially erased) original text. In spite of its excessively taxonomic nature, this massive volume is still a highly influential study: Genette’s rigorous attempt to map such a wide range of *relations palimpsestueuses* is considered remarkable, to say the least.⁴⁸ He begins this *open structuralist* analysis⁴⁹ by elucidating the term *transtextualité*, by which he means “transcendance textuelle du texte, que je définissais déjà, grossièrement, par « tout ce qui le met en relation, manifeste ou secrète, avec d’autres textes »”.⁵⁰ Genette’s notion – which includes all the various forms of textual transcendence – is subsequently subdivided into five kinds of “relations transtextuelles”.⁵¹ The first category in his map is *intertextualité*. Distancing himself from Kristeva’s use of this word, he gives a restricted definition of it: “une relation de coprésence entre deux ou plusieurs textes, c’est-à-dire, eidétiquement et le plus souvent, [...] la présence effective d’un texte dans

⁴⁶ Allen, p. 92.

⁴⁷ Allen, p. 92.

⁴⁸ “Per quanto animata da un eccessivo furore tassonomico e nomenclatorio, tipico di Genette, l’opera rimane un imprescindibile punto di riferimento, se non altro per lo sforzo di sintesi e di esaustività”. Marina Polacco, *L’intertestualità* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1998), p. 28.

⁴⁹ “That is, a poetics which gives up on the idea of establishing a stable, ahistorical, irrefutable map or division of literary elements, but which instead studies the relationships (sometimes fluid, never unchanging) which link the text with the architextural network out of which it produces its meaning. [...] This, it must be noted, is not a radical instability or pluralism à la Barthes or Kristeva, but a *pragmatic* structuralism which Genette goes on to exemplify in the two studies which succeed *The Architext*.” Allen, p. 97 [original emphasis].

⁵⁰ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 7.

⁵¹ Genette, p. 8.

un autre”.⁵² Genette terms the second kind of transtextuality *paratextualité*, that is to say “la relation, généralement moins explicite et plus distante, que, dans l’ensemble formé par une œuvre littéraire, le texte proprement dit entretient avec ce que l’on ne peut guère nommer que son *paratexte*”.⁵³ The third category is what he calls *métatextualité* (“la relation, on dit plus couramment de « commentaire », qui unit un texte à un autre texte dont il parle, sans nécessairement le citer (le convoquer), voire, à la limite, sans le nommer”⁵⁴), while his most ‘abstract’ type of transxtextuality, *architextualité*, is described as follows: “l’ensemble des catégories générales, ou transcendantes – types de discours, modes d’énonciation, genres littéraires, etc. – dont relève chaque texte singulier”.⁵⁵

However, after sketching this transtextual map, Genette focuses exclusively (and extensively) on the form he dubs *hypertextualité*: “toute relation unissant un texte B (que j’appellerai *hypertexte*) à un texte antérieur A (que j’appellerai, bien sûr, *hypotexte*) sur lequel il se greffe d’une manière qui n’est pas celle du commentaire”.⁵⁶ Within the hypertextual area, Genette differentiates two types of rewriting (*transformation* and *imitation*) and three kinds of modes (*régimes*), that is *ludique*, *satirique*, and *sérieux*. Moreover, by combining them, he identifies six possible sub-categories: *parodie* (ludic transformation), *travestissement* (satiric transformation), *transposition* (serious transformation), *pastiche* (ludic imitation), *charge* (satiric imitation), *forgerie* (serious

⁵² Genette, p. 8.

⁵³ Genette, p. 9 [original emphasis].

⁵⁴ Genette, p. 10.

⁵⁵ Genette, p. 7.

⁵⁶ Genette, pp. 11-12. It is important to note that Genette’s *hypotexte* is called by many scholars *inter-text* (“a text which can be definitely located as a major source of signification for a text” – Allen, p. 104), while what he terms *hypertexte* should be distinguished from its digital counterpart (“interconnected texts and graphics on a screen that enable a reader to read across, and cross-refer, documents” – Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 107).

imitation).⁵⁷ Although this chart is crucial to Genette's study, he points out that the different hypertextual practices he describes are not hermetically sealed compartments, but porous categories which can overlap. In the very last pages of *Palimpsestes*, he also suggests that the hypertext encourages an open structuralist "lecture relationnelle (lire deux ou plusieurs textes *en fonction* l'un de l'autre)"⁵⁸ and, at the same time, emphasises the playful nature of this transtextual category:

Mais le plaisir de l'hypertexte est aussi un *jeu*. La porosité des cloisons entre les régimes tient surtout à la force de contagion, dans cet aspect de la production littéraire, du régime ludique. À la limite, aucune forme d'hypertextualité ne va sans une part de jeu, consubstantielle à la pratique du remploi de structures existantes [...].⁵⁹

Therefore, at its best, Genette's *hypertexte* is, as he himself maintains, "un mixte indéfinissable, et imprévisible dans le détail, de sérieux et de jeu (lucidité et ludicité), d'accomplissement intellectuel et de divertissement".⁶⁰

2.4 The Phenomenology of Reading: Riffaterre

Although Michael Riffaterre's work seems "to straddle structuralism, poststructuralism, semiotics, psychoanalytic theories of literature and various other theories of reading", in Allen's opinion his output "is grounded on the belief in a stable and accurate account of textual meaning and intertextual relations which we are [...] calling structuralist".⁶¹ Interestingly, Riffaterre's (inter)textual approach is essentially

⁵⁷ See Genette, p. 37.

⁵⁸ Genette, p. 452 [original emphasis].

⁵⁹ Genette, p. 452 [original emphasis].

⁶⁰ Genette, p. 453.

⁶¹ Allen, p. 111.

reader-oriented⁶²: his main concern is “with what it is to read, with what it is to *produce* a text”, rather than “with what might constitute the unchanging dimensions of the literary system itself”.⁶³ In his *Semiotics of Poetry* (1978), Riffaterre argues that the reading process consists of two subsequent levels: the *mimetic* reading – what he calls the *heuristic* reading – which depends on a reader’s linguistic competence and proceeds in a linear way, and a non-linear, *retroactive* operation (the *hermeneutic* reading) which allows readers to resolve – on a deeper semiotic level – the textual ambiguities and incongruities that they have recognised at first reading (*ungrammaticalities*). These initial contradictions compel the reader to switch to a non-referential kind of reading and thus “surmount the mimesis hurdle”.⁶⁴

Riffaterre’s interest in “the phenomenology of reading can be discerned in the rather blurred relationship drawn in his work between the notion of the ‘intertext’ and of the ‘hypogram’”.⁶⁵ The theorist also differentiates between his notion of inter-text and the more general concept of intertextuality. In his words, the inter-text “is a corpus of texts, textual fragments, or text-like segments of the sociolect that shares a lexicon and, to a lesser extent, a syntax with the text we are reading (directly or indirectly)”,⁶⁶ while intertextuality is defined as “the web of functions that constitutes and regulates the relationship between text and intertext”.⁶⁷

⁶² “La prospettiva generale in cui si colloca [...] la teoria intertestuale di Michael Riffaterre [...] è quella di un orientamento verso il *lettore* [...]. L’attenzione di Riffaterre è focalizzata infatti sulla definizione dello stesso *processo di lettura* inteso come un percorso di interpretazione del testo letterario”. Andrea Bernardelli, *Intertestualità* (Milan: La Nuova Italia, 2000), p. 17 [original emphasis].

⁶³ Allen, p. 117 [original emphasis].

⁶⁴ Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington, IN and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 6.

⁶⁵ Allen, p. 117 [original emphasis].

⁶⁶ Michael Riffaterre, “Intertextual Representation: On Mimesis as Interpretative Discourse”, quoted in Allen, p. 117.

⁶⁷ Michael Riffaterre, “Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive”, quoted in Allen, p. 117.

Since the inter-text belongs to the domain of the sociolect, what the reader needs to (be able to) do is to ‘presuppose’ the inter-text on the basis of his/her background experiences.⁶⁸ This ‘anticipation’ is connected with the notion of the hypogram (“the text imagined [...] in its pretransformation state”),⁶⁹ an element which reinforces the idea that Riffaterre’s theory focuses primarily on the reader, who is supposed to have the ability to delve deeper and ‘decrypt’ the meaning of the text.

2.5 Bloom’s Intertextual Conflicts

If most of this intertextual overview has been devoted to French theorists (except for Bakhtin and Kristeva, a Bulgarian woman who – however – has lived and worked in France since the mid-Sixties), this final (sub)section concentrates on the output of a US critic, Harold Bloom, who, in turn, has been deeply influenced by Continental European theory. It is interesting to note how Riffaterre, a Frenchman who spent his entire academic career in the United States, may be considered a sort of bridging figure between Bloom and French theory. As Allen observes, Riffaterre’s approach shares common elements with Bloom’s, in particular its focus on the reading process: “Both theorists reduce intertextuality to a model of text and inter-text, and by so doing produce very compelling reading strategies”.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, Riffaterre’s desire for stability differs from Bloom’s viewpoint: “whilst for Riffaterre such an approach produces

⁶⁸ “We do not, that is, need to discover specific inter-texts behind the texts we read; all we need to do to produce a sufficient interpretation is to assume that such an inter-text – either a specific text or a piece of socially significant language – is being transformed by the text in question”. Allen, p. 118.

⁶⁹ Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, p. 63.

⁷⁰ Allen, p. 134.

interpretative certainty, for Bloom critical reading is itself always a form of misreading”.⁷¹

The idea of misreading is crucial to Bloom’s major work, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), which, in his words, “offers a theory of poetry by way of a description of poetic influence, or the story of intra-poetic relationships”.⁷² Drawing on Freud’s psychoanalytic theories (especially the Oedipus complex), this study explores Romantic poetry by focusing on the problematic relationship between a poet (the *ephebe*) and his precursor/s. Torn between two *drives* (the impulse to imitate his poetic father and the desire to establish his own originality and uniqueness), the ephebe, who is doomed to belatedness, struggles with the burden of this literary debt. His poetic writing stems from an act of misreading through which he attempts to find his own voice. Indeed, to become what Bloom calls a *strong poet*, the ephebe must rewrite his precursor’s output:

*Poetic Influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets, – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.*⁷³

To conclude, it is worth considering that Bloom’s intertextual theory of misreading/miswriting promotes a restrictive vision of literature as something existing “in a hermetically sealed universe”.⁷⁴ Overlooking the relevance of the external (non-

⁷¹ Allen, p. 134.

⁷² Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, 2nd edn, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997 [1973]), p. 5.

⁷³ Bloom, p. 30 [original emphasis].

⁷⁴ Allen, p. 137.

textual) context, it can reasonably be argued that his model of “literary revisionism is not as revisionary in an ‘extensive’, sociocultural sense”.⁷⁵

3. A NEW ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE: ADAPTATION STUDIES

It can hardly be denied that “[a]daptations are everywhere today”⁷⁶: the early twentieth-first century has indeed seen “a move in almost all cultural forms [e.g. literature, theatre, cinema, painting, architecture, fashion] to practices of cultural regurgitation”.⁷⁷ Contextually, as Thomas Leitch argues in his 2008 article “Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads”, “[a]fter years of being stuck in the backwaters of the academy”, the (relatively young) academic discipline of Adaptation Studies “is on the move”.⁷⁸ This statement is confirmed by an authority in this field, the Italian-Canadian scholar Linda Hutcheon, who – in the Preface to the second edition of her seminal study *A Theory of Adaptation* – affirms that, in the short span between 2006 and 2013, “[t]he field of adaptation studies itself has grown immensely”.⁷⁹ Moreover, Hutcheon observes that, before the first publication of her volume, the crucial question was that of “fidelity” to prior texts, also because “much of the early work in the field had been based on comparative case studies of particular works, rather than attempting to theorize more broadly the phenomenon of adaptation”.⁸⁰ Thanks to the publication of a number

⁷⁵ Moraru, p. 33.

⁷⁶ Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013[2006]), p. 2.

⁷⁷ Allen, p. 204.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Monika Pietrzak-Franger and Eckart Voigts-Virchow, “Staging the Palimpsest: An Introduction to Adaptation and Appropriation in Performance”, in *Adaptation – Performing Across Media and Genres*, ed. by Monika Pietrzak-Franger and Eckart Voigts-Virchow (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2009), pp. 1-16 (p. 6).

⁷⁹ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. xxvi.

⁸⁰ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. xxvi.

of pivotal theoretical studies,⁸¹ “the critical terrain has changed immensely, though vestiges of fidelity criticism still remain in reviewing practices, especially of films adapted from beloved novels”.⁸² Thus, this research area seems to oscillate between innovation and tradition: on the one hand, with the appearance of new theoretical volumes and journals,⁸³ this growing field of study “has been expanding its scope in recent years”;⁸⁴ however, on the other hand, “film and fiction still appear to remain at the top of the list of major academic concerns”.⁸⁵ It should be noted that the origins of Adaptation Studies lie precisely in this (intertextual) relationship between literary and cinematic materials. Allen even suggests that “the discipline of film studies itself partly emerged from the examination of this relationship”.⁸⁶ However, when Film Studies became a distinct area of scholarly research, “the question of the filmic adaptation of literature [was left] to those working in departments of literature and cultural studies”.⁸⁷ The literary approach to (cinematic) adaptation throws light on the inherently intertextual nature of this phenomenon and is entirely in keeping with Allen’s idea that “[i]ntertextuality as a theory and an interpretive practice has played a significant role in

⁸¹ For instance, see Kamilla Elliott, *Rethinking the Novel/Film Debate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. by Robert Stam and Alessandra Raengo (Oxford: Blackwell 2005), *Books in Motion: Adaptation, Intertextuality, Authorship*, ed. by Mireia Aragay (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), the already quoted study by Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Thomas Leitch, *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents: From Gone with the Wind to The Passion of the Christ* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), Christine Geraghty, *Now a Major Motion Picture: Film Adaptations of Literature and Drama* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation: Literature, Film, and the Arts*, ed. by Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2012).

⁸² Hutcheon with O’Flynn , p. xxvi.

⁸³ 2008 saw the publication of the journal of the Association of Adaptation Studies (*Adaptation*, Oxford University Press).

⁸⁴ Hutcheon with O’Flynn , p. xxvi.

⁸⁵ Hutcheon with O’Flynn , p. xxvi.

⁸⁶ Allen, p. 205.

⁸⁷ Allen, p. 205.

the recent development of adaptation studies as a new academic discipline”.⁸⁸ Although eminent academics working within this field “recognize the significance of intertextuality to the discussion of adaptation”,⁸⁹ what is worth noting, as Rainer Emig observes, is that adaptation scholars “need to broaden this intertextual frame of thought”.⁹⁰ In this light, after an outline of some of the most important theories articulated within this field by Linda Hutcheon and Julie Sanders, the final part of this section seeks to explore new (interdisciplinary) directions by focusing on the fruitful cross-pollination between Adaptation Studies and other disciplines, such as Reception Studies, Translation Studies, and Cultural Studies.

3.1 Linda Hutcheon’s Theory (and Practice) of Adaptation

In the preface to the 2006 edition of what has been defined as “the most important book within the recent spate of work that has re-invigorated an ailing adaptation studies”,⁹¹ Linda Hutcheon states that she aims to explore the multi-faceted phenomenon of adaptation in the broadest sense, that is “in all its various media incarnations”.⁹² Indeed, the “variety and ubiquity”⁹³ of this practice demonstrate how focusing exclusively on the cinematic remediation of canonical novels proves

⁸⁸ Allen, p. 204. Interestingly, Allen observes that intertextual theories, which constantly “need to be rearticulated and [...] revamped” (p. 204) to keep up with the dynamic field of adaptation, cannot always be defined as safe and stable theoretical frameworks. Indeed, their (disruptive) poststructuralist renditions represent “a major threat to the establishment of a viable discipline of adaptation studies” (p. 206). For this reason, many adaptation scholars have decided to draw on “the more circumscribed and formalist” taxonomy of Genette (p. 206). In Julie Sanders’s words, “adaptation studies often favour a kind of ‘open structuralism’ along the lines proposed by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsests* [...], readings which are invested not in proving a text’s closure to alternatives, but in celebrating its ongoing interaction with other texts and artistic productions” (p. 18).

⁸⁹ Pietrzak-Franger and Voigts-Virchow, p. 8.

⁹⁰ Rainer Emig, “Adaptation in Theory”, in *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation*, pp. 14-24 (p. 15).

⁹¹ Pietrzak-Franger and Voigts-Virchow, p. 1.

⁹² Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. xiv.

⁹³ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. xiv.

insufficient in a culture where “[a]daptation has run amok”.⁹⁴ Hutcheon’s study is based on the understanding of this “form of repetition without replication”⁹⁵ as “both a product and a process of creation and reception”,⁹⁶ and attacks the popular idea that an adaptation is nothing more than a minor and secondary work lacking originality. In her de-hierarchised opinion, “multiple versions of a story in fact exist laterally, not vertically: adaptations are derived from, ripped off from, but are not derivative or second-rate”.⁹⁷ However, even if adaptations can be defined and valued as autonomous artefacts, their palimpsestic nature should not be overlooked: “Although adaptations are also aesthetic objects in their own right, it is only as inherently double- or multilaminated works that they can be theorized *as adaptations*”.⁹⁸

Hutcheon’s study, which has sprung from her interest in (the politics of) intertextuality, “derive[s] theory from practice – as wide a cultural practice as possible”.⁹⁹ As she explains, her examination draws on various theories – semiotics, poststructuralism, (demystification of) feminism, and postcolonialism – without espousing and imposing any specific perspective. Rather, she seeks “to identify a text-based issue that extends across a variety of media, find ways to study it comparatively, and then tease out the theoretical implications from multiple textual examples”.¹⁰⁰

The structure of Hutcheon’s book exemplifies her pragmatic approach to adaptation theory: the main chapters deal with the essential (wh-)questions (What? Who? Why? How? Where? When?) related to the transtextual product/process, trying to deliver some possible answers by examining various case studies. This seemingly

⁹⁴ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. xiii.

⁹⁵ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. xviii.

⁹⁶ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. xvi.

⁹⁷ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. 169.

⁹⁸ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. 6. [original emphasis].

⁹⁹ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. xiv.

¹⁰⁰ Hutcheon with O’Flynn, p. xiv.

simplistic method is a useful tool to investigate the various aspects of adaptation, from the aesthetic and intentional dimensions to the importance of audiences and contexts.

3.2 Julie Sanders: Adaptation and/or Appropriation?

2006 saw the publication of another pivotal study in this field, Julie Sanders's *Adaptation and Appropriation*. As the English Literature and Drama scholar states in the Introduction, the main concern of this volume is "the literariness of literature",¹⁰¹ in other words "how literature is made by literature".¹⁰² Here, Sanders seeks to distinguish between the categories of adaptation and appropriation: explicitly acknowledging the original work, the adaptive mode implies "a more sustained engagement with a single text or source than the more glancing act of allusion or quotation, even citation, allows"¹⁰³, whereas appropriation "carries out the same sustained engagement as adaptation but frequently adopts a posture of critique, even assault".¹⁰⁴ Although the latter is more radical and the sense of ownership in this case is evidently stronger, it is not easy to draw a clear-cut distinction between these two kinds of (re)creative products/processes. Indeed, as the theatre scholar Margherita Laera points out, "the terminology concerning intertextual practices of rewriting is contested".¹⁰⁵ As far as Sanders's main distinction is concerned, for instance, Laera opts to use the two terms as synonyms "because it is too problematic to draw the line between a 'faithful adaptation'

¹⁰¹ Sanders, p. 1.

¹⁰² Sanders, p. 1.

¹⁰³ Sanders, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ Sanders, p. 4.

¹⁰⁵ Margherita Laera, "Introduction: Return, Rewrite, Repeat: The Theatricality of Adaptation", in *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat*, ed. by Margherita Laera (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), pp. 1- 17 (p. 5).

and an ‘unfaithful appropriation’ (faithful or unfaithful to what, anyway?)”.¹⁰⁶ However, Sanders herself is well aware of the terminological instability of this research area and even opens her study by stressing this slippery point, which becomes a recurring concern throughout *Adaptation and Appropriation*. Indeed, before quoting Adrian Poole’s list of terms about the Victorian penchant for remaking (and adding her own suggestions to his “linguistic riff”¹⁰⁷), Sanders firmly states that “[t]he vocabulary of adaptation is highly labile”.¹⁰⁸ After a few lines, she adds that this “profusion rather than fixity [...] is part of its essence and importance”.¹⁰⁹ Again, in the section dealing with adaptation, she argues that this discipline “mobilize[s] a wide vocabulary of active terms”,¹¹⁰ and reiterates this idea in the following chapter, entirely devoted to appropriation:

in searching for ways of articulating the processes of adaptation and appropriation we need a *more active* vocabulary. A *kinetic* vocabulary, as I have termed it, is one that would be dynamic, moving forward rather than conducting the purely backward-looking search for source or origin.¹¹¹

If, as already observed, “Sanders’s differentiation is open to debate”,¹¹² it is reasonable enough to think that her contribution to Adaptation (and Appropriation) Studies lies in capturing and investigating the heterogeneous features of a new and lively field of scholarly research.

¹⁰⁶ Laera, p. 5.

¹⁰⁷ “[V]ariation, version, interpretation, imitation, proximation, supplement, increment, improvisation, prequel, sequel, continuation, addition, paratext, hypertext, palimpsest, graft, rewriting, reworking, refashioning, re-vision, re-evaluation”. Sanders, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Sanders, p. 3.

¹⁰⁹ Sanders, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ Sanders, p. 18.

¹¹¹ Sanders, p. 38 [my emphasis].

¹¹² Pietrzak-Franger and Voigts-Virchow, p. 10.

3.3 Adaptation as Scholarly Cross-pollination

Although Hutcheon and Sanders have undeniably played a major role in theorising adaptation (and appropriation), the definition of the boundaries of this academic discipline still remains problematic. In a unique way, this dynamic research area, which is constantly developing, evolving, and re-defining itself, perfectly exemplifies the idea of scholarly cross-fertilisation. Thanks to its porous borders, ‘Adaptationland’ seems to be a liminal, in-between zone that promotes stimulating contacts, intersections, and exchanges. As Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner observe, “[t]he interdisciplinary nature of adaptation studies invites dialogue across the borders of research traditions and terminologies, which have at times enviously been guarded as precious hoards in the treasury of individual disciplines”.¹¹³ If, on the one hand, Emig states that “adaptation needs theory”, on the other hand he argues that it “cannot and must not rely on one theory or even one clearly prescribed set of theories only”.¹¹⁴ Rather, this academic field “requires terminology and methods like every other discipline, but its multi- and interdisciplinary status also determines its multi-, inter- and transtheoretical attachments”.¹¹⁵ Entirely in keeping with its etymology,¹¹⁶ adaptation thus needs to adapt itself to its multi-faceted, slippery, and protean object of study. In

¹¹³ Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner, “Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation”, in *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation*, pp. 1-13 (p. 1).

¹¹⁴ Emig, p. 14.

¹¹⁵ Emig, p. 14.

¹¹⁶ “The word ‘adaptation’ comes to us from the Latin ‘adaptare’ meaning ‘adjust’ – a combination of the prefix ‘ad-’ (to) and ‘aptus’ (fitted) –. Chamber’s *Etymological Dictionary of the English Usage* (1867) defines it as ‘the act of making suitable’ as well as ‘the state of being suitable’ (5)”. Ignacio Ramos Gay, “Introduction: Rehabilitating Adaptation”, in *Adaptations, Versions and Perversions in Modern British Drama*, ed. by Ignacio Ramos Gay (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 1-10 (p. 1).

turn, its theory becomes “an ongoing adaptation”,¹¹⁷ drawing on the critical tools of other research areas in the name of interdisciplinarity.

3.3.1 Adaptation and Cultural Studies

Although – in the most traditional (and narrow) sense – Adaptation Studies examine the transmigration of a textual artefact into a cinematic product, we have already stressed that this research field is currently expanding its (porous) boundaries to include the transposition of various kinds of non-textual materials embedded in cultural discourse. As the Communication scholar Milan Pribisic observes, the latest trends in this growing academic discipline “are part of the effort to make adaptation studies a place of negotiation, a hybrid space of *cultural recycling*”.¹¹⁸ In this light, the political-ideological implications of the cultural context in which the adaptive process takes place become increasingly important: “Adaptation never happens inside an aesthetic vacuum, but inside ideologies and power structures that determine not merely the cultural value attributed to adaptation, but in many cases whether adaptations are possible at all”.¹¹⁹ Thus, as Emig makes clear, Cultural Studies (especially Pierre Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” and Michel Foucault’s reflections on power and knowledge) “are [...] required as the third element in the theoretical set-up of Adaptation Studies besides Intertextuality and Intermediality”.¹²⁰ Moreover, it is worth considering that this enlarged notion of adaptation as a cultural practice throws light on the relationship

¹¹⁷ Emig, p. 23.

¹¹⁸ Milan Pribisic, “The Pleasures of ‘Theater Film’: Stage to Film Adaptation”, in *Redefining Adaptation Studies*, ed. by Dennis Cutchins, Laurence Raw, and James M. Welsh (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010), pp. 147-60 (p. 148) [my emphasis].

¹¹⁹ Emig, p. 16.

¹²⁰ Emig, p. 16.

between the adaptive phenomenon and the more radical one of appropriation and, at the same time, poses new aesth/ethical questions. With his *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (2008),¹²¹ James O. Young has been the first to investigate these controversial aesthetic and moral issues from a philosophical perspective, focusing on a category, that of appropriation, that – as the English Literature scholar Diego Saglia points out – “has not yet received adequate attention in theoretical reflections on intercultural transfers”.¹²²

3.3.2 Adaptation and Translation Studies

If the disputed phenomenon of appropriation “plays a central role in cultural construction and intercultural traffic”,¹²³ translation is equally concerned with interlinguistic dynamics and intercultural contacts. Nonetheless, as Saglia notes, Translation Studies have traditionally shown “widespread antipathy [...] to projections of translation beyond its traditionally textual purview”,¹²⁴ focusing on the merely literal dimension of this practice and overlooking its metaphorical implications. Despite such inherited scholarly barriers, a broader understanding of translation – “envisag[ing] [it] both as [...] a process of intertextual transposition and an overarching rubric for intercultural shifts”¹²⁵ – offers a breeding ground for reflections on the interplay between this practice and that of adaptation. Indeed, if we consider translation

¹²¹ James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (Malden (MA), Oxford, and Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008). See also *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, ed. by James O. Young and Conrad G. Brunk (Malden (MA), Oxford, and Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

¹²² Diego Saglia, “Modes of Transit: Cultural Translation, Appropriation, and Intercultural Transfers”, in *Bridging Cultures: Intercultural Mediation in Literature, Linguistics and the Arts*, ed. by Ciara Hogan, Nadine Rentel, and Stephanie Schwerter (Stuttgart: *ibidem*-Verlag, 2012), pp. 93-112 (p. 103). On appropriation, see the section entitled “Modes of Cultural Appropriation”, pp. 103-6.

¹²³ Saglia, p. 107.

¹²⁴ Saglia, p. 93.

¹²⁵ Saglia, pp. 94-95.

metaphorically, that is to say as a (more or less faithful) dislocation of an artefact beyond its linguistic and cultural borders, we can easily draw some parallels and identify similarities between this operation and what is termed adaptation. In extreme cases, when translating words means (re)creating a free version of the source text, it could be even argued that translation and adaptation overlap. It should also be noted that the shared features and concerns between these two intercultural operations encourage the transplant of essential theoretical tools belonging to Translation Studies into the field of adaptation. As a paradigmatic example, Laera observes that the American Translation scholar Lawrence Venuti's strategies of 'domestication' and 'foreignization'¹²⁶ "can be usefully employed in the context of [...] intertextual stage adaptation given the interpretative nature of theatrical transposition".¹²⁷ Once again, scholarly cross-pollination engenders theoretical cross-fertilization.

3.3.3 Adaptation and Reception Studies

Lorna Hardwick's work, especially her 2000 study *Translating Words, Translating Cultures*, exemplifies well the fruitful interfaces between translation/adaptation and Classical Reception Studies, a recent discipline which – as anticipated in my Preface – is particularly relevant to the concerns of this dissertation. Thanks to her interdisciplinary background (Ancient History, European Literature, and History of Ideas), Hardwick embraces a multifaceted perspective and endorses the wider

¹²⁶ By reference to the German theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, Venuti distinguishes between "[...] a domesticating method, an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home, and a foreignizing method, an ethnoveviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad". Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 20.

¹²⁷Laera, p. 8.

notion of cultural translation, defining this multilayered process as “a movement which takes place not only across languages, but across time, place, beliefs and cultures”.¹²⁸ In a fascinating network of scholarly intricacies and contacts, the emerging field of Classical Reception Studies is, therefore, “concerned not only with individual texts and their relationship with one another but also with the broader cultural processes which shape and make up those relationships”.¹²⁹ The inherent exchange between Reception Studies and adaptation as a textual and, at the same time, cultural operation permeates Hardwick’s critical output. Aptly, the terminological taxonomy that she suggests in her 2003 guide to this new research field draws simultaneously on Translation, Adaptation, and Cultural Studies.¹³⁰ For instance, in her opinion, the adapted artefact is “a version of the source developed for a different purpose or insufficiently close to count as a translation”.¹³¹ By appropriation, instead, she means the act of “taking an ancient image or text and using it to sanction subsequent ideas or practices (explicitly or implicitly)”.¹³² This terminological transmigration is just another of the cross-disciplinary examples which throw light on the scholarly cross-pollination energising the increasingly prominent field of Adaptation Studies.

¹²⁸ Lorna Hardwick, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* (London: Duckworth, 2000), p. 17.

¹²⁹ Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, p. 5.

¹³⁰ Among others, Hardwick’s vocabulary includes meaningful terms such as acculturation, adaptation, appropriation, foreignization, hybrid, intervention, migration, refiguration, translation, transplant and version. Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, pp. 9-10.

¹³¹ Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, p. 9.

¹³² Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, p. 9.

THEORY II:

TRAGEDY, THE TRAGIC, PHILOSOPHY, AND TRAGIC THEORY

1. TRAGEDY AND THE TRAGIC

What is tragedy? Any critic approaching the complexities of tragic aesthetics is equally haunted and fascinated by the resonance of this crucial, and far from simple, question. In his *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* (1983), the Shakespeare scholar Stephen Booth effectively conveys this epistemological frustration by arguing that “[t]he search for a definition of tragedy has been the most persistent and widespread of all nonreligious quests for definition”.¹ This ongoing inquiry and the impossibility of finding a satisfactory answer are probably due to the ontological implications and affective impact of a dramatic genre “created to confront the most difficult experiences we face: death, loss, injustice, thwarted passion, despair”.² Indeed, tragedy has the capacity to delve into our darkest emotions and stage their extreme consequences, compelling us “to bear witness to the worst and most exemplary moments of sorrow and desperation that face us as human beings”.³

So intimately connected with our human nature, this elaborate art form has never ceased to stimulate artists, writers, and thinkers. As the English Renaissance scholar and comparatist Rebecca Bushnell observes in her Introduction to *A Companion to Tragedy* (2005), the intricacies between the structural features and the socio-ethical implications

¹ Quoted in John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler, “Introduction”, in *Tragedy*, ed. by John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler (Harlow and New York: Longman, 1998), pp. 1-20 (p. 1).

² Jennifer Wallace, *The Cambridge Introduction to Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 1.

³ Wallace, p. 1.

of this dramatic artefact have taken centre stage in the debate: “[i]n the West, in the centuries since Aristophanes, philosophers and poets have grappled with the question of how tragedy’s formality, ethical example, and civic role intersect – for better or for worse”.⁴ Moreover, Bushnell stresses the exegetic openness of this literary and artistic form, which can be interpreted in various ways:

It may be valued and defined in purely formal terms, or it may be understood as a spiritual or world view; it may be understood as an experience for the individual reader and thus a psychological phenomenon, or as a communal or political act, and thus an historical ‘event’. [...] in Western culture the meaning of tragedy is inseparable from history. The dramatic genre of tragedy has its roots in the religion and politics of the Greek city-state, and it lives still as a profoundly social art.⁵

If tragedy welcomes – among others – formalist, religious, philosophical, psychoanalytic, and political analyses, Bushnell suggests that it is important to adopt a parallel historical approach in order to contextualise these diverse interpretations. Indeed, whereas such constructions “are themselves embedded in their own historical moments, they have powerfully affected how we have understood tragedy’s cultural and ethical effects”.⁶

Rita Felski, another eminent American scholar working in the field of English Studies, similarly opens her Introduction to *Rethinking Tragedy* (2008) by celebrating the increasing number of contemporary interpretations of the tragic form: “while the writing of tragedy may have waned in recent times, readings of tragedy have proliferated”.⁷ Felski adds that this extensive range of constructions focuses especially on the original structure created and developed by the Greeks, which reached its apex in

⁴ Rebecca Bushnell, “A Companion to Tragedy: Introduction”, in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. by Rebecca Bushnell (Malden (MA), Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 1-4 (pp. 1-2).

⁵ Bushnell, p. 2.

⁶ Bushnell, p. 2.

⁷ Rita Felski, “Introduction”, in *Rethinking Tragedy*, ed. by Rita Felski (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), pp. 1-25 (p. 1).

fifth-century Athens. Famously defined as the highest form of drama, Greek tragedy is often considered “an exemplary source of insight into ethical and philosophical questions”.⁸ In a unique way, “in its very remoteness from the present, it throws light on the dilemmas and contradictions of modernity”.⁹ However, it is appropriate to note that the Greek template has been incessantly translated, reworked and transplanted into other contexts and eras. The permeability (and mutability) of this dramatic material is well exemplified by the practices of textual reinterpretation and cultural transmigration already present in the classical world: the phenomenon of reception within antiquity consists precisely in the Roman appropriation of Hellenic sources. As far as the re-figuration of theatrical texts and practices is concerned, “Athenian tragedy was transformed into an art form which was disseminated throughout the Greek-speaking world, translated and imitated by Roman dramatists”.¹⁰ Subsequently, ancient tragedy crossed the boundaries of the Graeco-Roman world, and its impact has been enormous, in particular on the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European stages, not to mention contemporary theatre. As a result, these multifarious dramatic/theatrical revisions and renditions of tragedy have provided an inspiration for “endless and interminable commentary. Gathered together in their entirety, these definitions and discussions of tragedy, along with the detailed exegeses of its Greek, Shakespearian, French classical, and modern exemplars, could easily fill a bookstore”.¹¹ The inherent capacity of this literary archetype to be re-(en)visioned across centuries seems to be stronger than its perishability. As Sarah Annes Brown puts it, “[t]he persistence of tragedy may in part

⁸ Felski, p. 1.

⁹ Felski, p. 1.

¹⁰ Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 16.

¹¹ Felski, p. 1.

be ascribed to its capacity to be adapted and transformed across periods and cultures, indeed to be enriched by such displacement”.¹²

If the term ‘tragedy’ commonly refers to a dramatic form dealing with inherently disturbing contents and ruled by well-established conventions, it is worth considering that scholars have conventionally “distinguished between three kinds of meaning and usage clustering around ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic’: the literary, the philosophical, and the vernacular”.¹³ While the first meaning describes what is unanimously defined as the most prestigious dramatic genre,¹⁴ the second and third usages blur the boundaries between the literary/theatrical world and the existential dimension. For the French philosopher and critic Henri Gouhier, this polarization is evident when we compare the literary meaning of ‘tragedy’ to the philosophical idea of ‘the tragic’: “[t]ragedy belongs to literature and to theatre, the tragic belongs to life”.¹⁵ Although such distinctions should not be excessively taxonomic and categorical, it is certainly possible – and, in a sense, necessary – to differentiate between the various facets of the tragic prism. The Italian classicist Pierpaolo Fornaro, for instance, stresses the need for an essential distinction between tragedy and what he terms a ‘conceptual substance’ from which the tragic emerges: “È morta la tragedia? Qui occorre di necessità distinguere una struttura come il genere in sé riconosciuto tragico da una ‘sostanza’ concettuale da cui quel messaggio che chiamiamo *il tragico* emerge”.¹⁶ While Fornaro distinguishes between a

¹² Sarah Annes Brown, “Introduction: Tragedy in Transition”, in *Tragedy in Transition*, ed. by Sarah Annes Brown and Catherine Silverstone (Malden (MA), Oxford, and Carlton (Victoria): Blackwell, 2007), pp. 1-15 (p. 1).

¹³ Felski, p. 2.

¹⁴ Quoting Glenn Most’s essay “Generating Genres: The Idea of the Tragic” (2000), Felski points out that “[i]n ancient Greece, [...] tragedy refers to literature rather than life; it is a genre rather than an idea, a form of dramatic poetry governed by certain conventions rather than an aspect of philosophy or a rendering of the irresolvable contradictions of human experience” (p. 2).

¹⁵ Quoted in Wallace, p. 2.

¹⁶ Pierpaolo Fornaro, “Mortalità della tragedia e necessità del tragico”, in *Il lessico della classicità nella letteratura europea moderna*, Volume I: *La letteratura drammatica*, Tome I: *Tragedia e dialogo*, Part I:

structure and a message springing from a conceptual substance, the theatre scholar Annamaria Cascetta argues that the sense of the tragic is ‘a permanent structure of human conscience’ which has been migrated into the theatrical form that we call tragedy (“Se il senso del tragico è una *struttura* permanente della coscienza umana, la tragedia è una *forma* in cui quella struttura storicamente si è tradotta. Sono stati la drammaturgia e la scena ad accoglierla e a esprimerla, quindi a farla essere”¹⁷).

Even if they obviously share a common linguistic and semantic root, it is probably easier to attempt to define ‘tragedy’ and ‘the tragic’ by throwing light on the differences rather than the similarities between these categories. As Felski puts it, while tragedy is a literary genre following accepted conventions, the philosophical notion of the tragic, “by contrast, is a thought pattern forged in the crucible of German Romanticism”,¹⁸ as first elaborated by Friedrich von Schiller and subsequently reworked by thinkers such as August Wilhelm von Schlegel, Friedrich von Schelling, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Søren Kierkegaard. Moreover, the tragic “is in turn premised on large-scale processes of secularization, disenchantment, and individualization that make it possible for human beings to think of themselves as caught up in conditions of isolation and existential homelessness”.¹⁹ As a result, the sense of the tragic gradually emancipates itself from tragedy, obtaining “a

La tragedia, ed. by Pierpaolo Fornaro, Marco Giovini, Ferruccio Bertini and Martina Treu (Rome: Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2008), pp. 373-84 (p. 377) [original emphasis]. In this magisterial volume, on the distinction between tragedy and the tragic in ancient Greece, see Pierpaolo Fornaro, “Tragedia e tragico nella Grecia antica”, pp. 7-41, and on the idea of the tragic in the twentieth century, Paolo Proietti’s chapter, “Il senso del tragico nel Novecento”, pp. 365-71. See also Chiara Lombardi, “La fine del ‘tragico’ nel teatro europeo tra Ottocento e Novecento”, pp. 309-16, examining the death of the tragic between the nineteenth and the twentieth century.

¹⁷ Annamaria Cascetta, *La tragedia nel teatro del Novecento. Coscienza del tragico e rappresentazione in un secolo al ‘limite’* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 2009), p. 3 [original emphasis].

¹⁸ Felski, p. 2.

¹⁹ Felski, pp. 2-3.

general theoretical salience and metaphorical power as a prism through which to grasp the antinomies of the human condition”.²⁰

Nevertheless, this separation of ‘tragedy’ and ‘the tragic’ has been fiercely criticized by two prominent British Marxist critics, Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, whose main studies on the subject will be discussed later in this chapter. Attacking taxonomies which separate art from real life, these distinguished thinkers “charge those who are prepared to divorce the term ‘tragedy’ from its normal, everyday usage with being elitist and indifferent to ordinary suffering”.²¹ As I will make clear in the section on twentieth-century theories of the tragic, while George Steiner has an absolute perception of tragedy, Williams and Eagleton demystify “coldly academic”²² notions such as ‘tragedy’ and ‘the tragic’, arguing that “tragedy is defined by its effect on people, by the normal, commonplace but still unbearable emotions of grief and devastation”.²³ Thus, their Marxist approach rehabilitates the ‘vernacular’ usage of ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic’ (applied to a wide range of situations such as fatal accidents, premature deaths, and large-scale events like 9/11) and seeks to reconcile the different facets of this semantic field, as well as the relationship between the public and the private, “the trivial” and “the catastrophic”,²⁴ (dramatic) literature and everyday experience.

Remarkably, after presenting the three main senses of ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic’, Felski herself points out that the current process of re-visioning tragic theory encourages us to go beyond this “tri-partite definition [...] that has long framed critical

²⁰ Felski, p. 3.

²¹ Wallace, p. 2.

²² Wallace, p. 3.

²³ Wallace, p. 3.

²⁴ Felski, p. 10.

discussion”.²⁵ Drawing on Alastair Fowler’s *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (1982), she suggests that conceiving tragedy as a *mode*²⁶ “offers several advantages in adjudicating the question of tragedy’s historical transformations”.²⁷ Indeed, *mode* is a more flexible term than *genre*: being “adjectival”²⁸, it “denot[es] a selective group of features rather than a text’s overall defining structure” and “draws our attention to the hybrid, mixed qualities of genres”.²⁹ And reconsidering tragedy as a mode is useful in that it allows us to focus on those mingled aspects which stress the importance of generic cross-pollination in contemporary drama/theatre and – more generally – culture. If the prescribed criteria governing “a now virtually defunct form of poetic drama”³⁰ are obviously obsolete, the tragic mode survives the decline of the genre and, in a sense, rewrites the notion (and the form) of tragedy itself. As the analysis of Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* will demonstrate, contemporary rewritings of ancient hypotexts often mix the tragic mode with the comic and the grotesque, promoting what Helene Foley terms “generic ambiguity”.³¹ In the end, as the character of Nell claims in Beckett’s *Endgame*, “[n]othing is funnier than unhappiness”.³²

²⁵ Felski, p. 14.

²⁶ On modes, see Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 106-11.

²⁷ Felski, p. 14.

²⁸ Fowler, p. 106.

²⁹ Felski, p. 14.

³⁰ Felski, p. 14.

³¹ See Helene Foley, “Generic Ambiguity in Modern Productions and New Versions of Greek Tragedy”, in *Theorising Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice*, ed. by Edith Hall and Stephe Harrop (London: Duckworth, 2010), pp. 137-52.

³² Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), p. 20.

2. TRAGEDY AND PHILOSOPHY

As John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler observe, thanks to its epistemological, political, ethical, and religious implications, tragedy has a special relationship with philosophy: “Of all the dramatic genres, tragedy is thought to be the most closely aligned with the discipline of philosophy. Its concern is with the production of knowledge and the human limits to its acquisition, and also with questions of politics, ethics and spirituality”.³³ Although this dissertation is not concerned with the philosophy of tragedy, this section aims to offer a brief overview of the ongoing dialogue between tragedy and philosophy, focusing on the landmark reflections of Aristotle (and his teacher Plato), Hegel, and Nietzsche.

To begin with, it is nearly impossible to approach the subject of tragedy without mentioning the Greek philosopher Aristotle, the first thinker to grapple analytically with this dramatic form. In Wallace’s words, “[a]s a result of his examination of the generic definition, the aesthetic form and the social effectiveness of tragic plays, the notion of tragic theory, or the philosophy of tragedy, was born”.³⁴ Aristotle’s brief, somewhat obscure, but highly influential *Poetics* – composed between the 360s and 320s BCE –³⁵ examines the tragic genre (and its function) by comparing it to other literary forms based on imitation (*mimesis*), and in particular the epic.³⁶ Thanks to additional features

³³ John Drakakis and Naomi Conn Liebler, “The Philosophy of Tragedy”, in *Tragedy*, pp. 21-22 (p. 21).

³⁴ Wallace, p. 117.

³⁵ See Kathy Eden, “Aristotle’s *Poetics*: A Defense of Tragic Fiction”, in *A Companion to Tragedy*, pp. 41-50 (p. 41).

³⁶ “Epic poetry [...] and the poetry of tragic drama, and, moreover, comedy and dithyrambic poetry, and most flute-playing and harp-playing, these, speaking generally, may all be said to be ‘representations of life’”. Aristotle, *The Poetics*, trans. by W. Hamilton Fyfe, in *Aristotle: The Poetics, “Longinus”: On the Sublime, Demetrius: On Style* (London and Cambridge, MA: William Heinemann and Harvard University Press, 1932 [1927]), pp. 1-118 (p. 5).

such as “spectacle” and “music”, tragedy provides “more vivid”³⁷ pleasure than its epic counterpart, as the philosopher states in Chapter 26. Moreover, the tragic form “attains its end with greater economy of length”,³⁸ while the epic “has less unity”.³⁹ It is hardly surprising that, for Aristotle, “the better of the two is tragedy”.⁴⁰

The theatre scholar David Wiles suggests that, if we want fully “to understand Aristotle’s take on theatre, we have to go back to the views of his teacher, Plato”.⁴¹ Interestingly, Plato’s *Republic* describes an ideal society ruled by philosophers in which there is no place for (Homer and) tragedy. According to Plato, theatre is an extremely dangerous and illusory kind of mimetic representation that must be banned from a utopian vision mainly because of its corrupting capacity to appeal to the audience’s senses. Starting his *Poetics* from the same premise as his master (poetry and drama are mimetic forms),⁴² Aristotle “also aims at the same end as his teacher, a mode of political containment that serves the established order in the city-state. He proceeds, though, by way of a very different set of conclusions”.⁴³ Indeed, several critics argue that Aristotle’s theory is a direct reaction against Plato’s idea of the role of poetry and theatre in his model republic: Aristotle aims to show how “drama, with all its pain and ribaldry, belongs in an ideal society”,⁴⁴ seeking “to integrate tragedy within his wider scheme of things”.⁴⁵

³⁷ Aristotle, p. 115.

³⁸ Aristotle, p. 115.

³⁹ Aristotle, p. 115.

⁴⁰ Aristotle, p. 117.

⁴¹ David Wiles, “Aristotle’s *Poetics* and Ancient Dramatic Theory”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, ed. by Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 92-107 (p. 93).

⁴² On the difference between Plato’s and Aristotle’s notions of ‘mimesis’, see Wiles, p. 96.

⁴³ Joe Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 49.

⁴⁴ Wiles, p. 94.

⁴⁵ Wallace, p. 117.

Aristotle examines tragedy's structural and functional features, pointing out that its core "is to be found both in the components of the tragic drama itself and also in the effect it has upon the audience".⁴⁶ If the plot is crucial to tragedy, the role of emotions should not be overlooked: more precisely, the philosopher focuses on these plot dynamics because of their profound impact on the audience. Although it may seem paradoxical, in a unique way, tragedy's arousal of disturbing emotions results in "the rather mysterious experience of emotional processing, or emotional purging, or maybe emotional cleansing"⁴⁷ that Aristotle famously termed 'catharsis'. In the philosopher's words: "it [tragedy] represents men in action and does not use narrative, and through *pity* and *fear* it effects relief to these and similar emotions".⁴⁸ If the notion of catharsis and the mechanisms through which it calms, cleanses and channels dangerous emotions are quite obscure and largely debated, this fascinating concept has entered the field of Theatre Studies and contemporary critics tend to view it as "a brave attempt to address the intractable problem of audience response".⁴⁹ However, the impact of Aristotle's work is not limited to the theatre. As Bushnell stresses, its influence on the philosophy of tragedy (and its relationship with psychoanalysis) is enormous: indeed, the Greek thinker "remains a point of reference for Hegel's refocusing on the tragic dialectic, Nietzsche's returning tragedy to Dionysus and redefining it as the essence of modernity,

⁴⁶ Wallace, p. 118.

⁴⁷ Kelleher, p. 49.

⁴⁸ Aristotle, p. 23 [my emphasis]. In the Loeb edition quoted here (1927), W. Hamilton Fyfe does not use the word 'catharsis' in English and opts for a slightly different translation, while in the 1995 edition translated by Stephen Halliwell the term is maintained ("[...] through pity and fear accomplishing the catharsis of such emotions", quoted in Wallace, p. 119). As Wallace points out, "[t]he word *catharsis* literally means washing, purifying or purging. The source of the controversy lies mainly in the ambiguity of the Greek at this point (*pathēmaton katharsin*) since, grammatically, it is not clear what is the connection between the emotions (*pathēmaton*) and the washing (*katharsin*). Is the subject washed free of the emotions? Or is it a washing of the emotions, a purification of the feelings of fear and pity already felt?". Wallace, pp. 119-20.

⁴⁹ Wiles, p. 100.

and Freud's and Lacan's reinterpretations of tragic paradigms in the psychic and symbolic orders".⁵⁰

Next to the huge impact of Aristotle's conceptualisation of the tragic form, as Mark W. Roche argues, the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel's account of tragedy "has become the most studied and quoted in the West".⁵¹ If Aristotle focuses on the coexistence of both intellect and emotions in our reaction to tragedy,⁵² Hegel's main concerns are reason and "the *ethical* content of tragic form".⁵³ His idea of tragedy is based on the conflict between two opposed positions. Although both of these poles are justified, at the same time each of them could be wrong because it does not recognise the plausibility of its counterpart. The tragic hero's fall is the only possibility to end this conflict, so that "unity is restored and the whole of ethical life is purged of its one-sidedness".⁵⁴ As Hegel points out in his *Aesthetics*:

The original essence of tragedy consists [...] in the fact that within such a conflict each of the opposed sides, if taken by itself, has *justification*, while on the other hand each can establish the true and positive content of its own aim and character only by negating and *damaging* the equally justified power of the other. Consequently, in its moral life, and because of it, each is just as much involved in *guilt*.⁵⁵

In view of its ethical implications, the core of Hegelian tragedy is its structure. If Aristotle sets store by the emotional impact of tragedy, Hegel's emphasis "on the structure of tragic collision gives him a new angle on the traditional motifs of fear and pity".⁵⁶ In his opinion, Roche adds, "the audience is to fear not external fate, as with

⁵⁰ Bushnell, p. 3.

⁵¹ Mark W. Roche, "The Greatness and Limits of Hegel's Theory of Tragedy", in *A Companion to Tragedy*, pp. 51-67 (p. 51).

⁵² See Wallace, p. 121.

⁵³ Drakakis and Conn Liebler, "The Philosophy of Tragedy", p. 21 [original emphasis].

⁵⁴ Roche, p. 52.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Roche, p. 52 [original emphasis].

⁵⁶ Roche, p. 54.

Aristotle, but the ethical substance which, if violated, will turn against the hero”.⁵⁷ The German philosopher himself states that we should not apply the Aristotelian idea of cathartic process

merely to the emotion of fear and pity, but should relate it to the principle of the *content*, the appropriately artistic display of which ought to purify such feelings. [...] That which mankind has therefore in truth to fear is not the external power and its oppression, but the ethical might which is self-defined in its own free rationality, and partakes further of the eternal and inviolable, the power a man summons against his own being when he turns his back upon it.⁵⁸

Drakakis and Conn Liebler observe that “[t]he philosophical context of Hegel’s theory is Enlightenment thought, which privileges rationality, the very movement which Nietzsche’s own anti-rationalism challenged”.⁵⁹ Deeply fascinated by the primordial drives lurking under the classical veneer, Nietzsche’s groundbreaking account of Greek tragedy, “as forged in the crucible of collective frenzy, orgiastic coupling, and rapturous self-loss”,⁶⁰ subverts traditional views of Hellenic antiquity “as the cradle of Western civilization and an epoch of enlightened serenity”.⁶¹ Drawing on Arthur Schopenhauer’s distinction between the notions of ‘representation’ and ‘will’, in *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik (The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music)* – first published in 1872 – Nietzsche examines the contrast between Apollo and Dionysus, the Greek gods who correspond to two antagonistic but interconnected “aesthetic principles” which are “equally vital to the production of the highest art”.⁶² In his words, these two drives

walk side by side, usually in violent opposition to one another, inciting one another to ever more powerful births, perpetuating the struggle of the opposition

⁵⁷ Roche, p. 54.

⁵⁸ G. W. F. Hegel, “Tragedy as a Dramatic Art”, in Drakakis and Conn Liebler, *Tragedy*, pp. 23-52 (p. 28) [original emphasis]. Reprinted from *Hegel on Tragedy*, ed. by Anne and Henry Paolucci (New York and London: Harper Torchbooks, 1975).

⁵⁹ Drakakis and Conn Liebler, “The Philosophy of Tragedy”, p. 21.

⁶⁰ Felski, p. 6.

⁶¹ Felski, p. 6.

⁶² James I. Porter, “Nietzsche and Tragedy”, in *A Companion to Tragedy*, pp. 68-87 (p. 72).

only apparently bridged by the word ‘art’; until, finally, by a metaphysical miracle of the Hellenic ‘will’, the two seem to be coupled, and in this coupling they seem at last to beget the work of art that is as Dionysiac as it is Apolline – Attic tragedy.⁶³

While the Apollonian stands for distinctively classical features such as order, reason, harmony, creativity, and art, the Dionysian represents disorder, irrationality, chaos, primordial instincts, and music. Since this opposition does not depend on morality but on different kinds of creativity, Nietzsche’s dichotomy is essentially aesthetic.⁶⁴ These two creative drives can redress a balance only by fighting in the tragic arena, which offers “a forum or a structure for an endlessly repeated aesthetic justification of creation and destruction”.⁶⁵ It is worth stressing that this kind of duality lies at the core of Nietzsche’s (somehow incongruous) tragic vision: as Wallace points out, “[p]ain and bliss are intimately intertwined in Nietzsche’s contradictory view of tragedy”.⁶⁶ Remarkably, his interest in the pleasure provided by the Dionysian ecstatic ritual and the transfiguring power of art and performance makes a significant contribution to modern tragic theory.

“Contradictory, dissonant and fragmentary”, Nietzsche’s idea of tragedy “is modernist in its mode, modern in its appeal”.⁶⁷ Indeed, with his book *The Birth of Tragedy*, defined as “an instant sensation and scandal”,⁶⁸ Nietzsche strongly revitalised the modern reception of the tragic archetype. As Porter observes, thanks to the German philosopher, “tragedy not only rose to prominence as a supreme literary and cultural achievement” but “also became a clarion call for modernism and a benchmark by which

⁶³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy Out of the Spirit of Music*, ed. by Michael Tanner and trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 14.

⁶⁴ See Wallace, p. 127.

⁶⁵ Wallace, p. 127.

⁶⁶ Wallace, p. 125.

⁶⁷ Wallace, p. 127.

⁶⁸ Porter, p. 82.

to measure the claims and aspirations of the modern world against the classical past”.⁶⁹ If Hegel believed that tragedy was one of the main transitory phases of the evolutionary process of human spirit, “it was Nietzsche who made tragedy into a touchstone of the future, and consequently of paramount importance for the present”.⁷⁰ Remarkably, the philosopher who was once “scorned by classicists”⁷¹ for his controversial vision of Greek antiquity, is nowadays “hailed as an inspirational figure and guide to rethinking tragedy”.⁷²

3. TRAGIC THEORY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Before examining the most significant developments in tragic theory in the twentieth- and twenty-first century, it should be noted how the roots of modern tragic discourse lie in Nietzsche’s pioneering ideas. Thanks to this crucially transitional figure, a sort of *trait d’union* between nineteenth- and twentieth-century thought, tragedy “suddenly became existentially relevant, a kind of primordial experience that brought one back not only to the depths of the human heart but to the roots of human history and human existence”.⁷³ Nietzsche’s impact on later theorists was profound: “It is doubtful that thinkers as diverse as Miguel de Unamuno, Karl Jaspers, and Raymond Williams would have given tragedy the central importance they did were it not for Nietzsche and his clamoring reception”.⁷⁴ Even if it is not possible to say that he exerted direct influence on those who became acquainted with his work on tragedy, Nietzsche “made

⁶⁹ Porter, p. 68.

⁷⁰ Porter, p. 69.

⁷¹ Felski, p. 6.

⁷² Felski, p. 6.

⁷³ Porter, p. 69.

⁷⁴ Porter, p. 68.

it difficult for anyone not to think of these things whenever the topic of modern life was on the table”.⁷⁵

While Nietzsche’s “life-affirming” text celebrates the birth of tragedy out of music,⁷⁶ George Steiner chose a funereal title for his 1961 book, a seminal text in literary criticism which, by contrast, declares the demise of tragedy. As Steiner himself points out, *The Death of Tragedy* ambitiously covers a “large, difficult ground”.⁷⁷ Indeed, this comprehensive study aims to survey (the decline of) the tragic genre from its origins to the twentieth century, exploring how this notion has changed throughout literary history. In his opening chapter, Steiner states that the tragic form “is not universal”.⁷⁸ Rather, he adds, “that representation of personal suffering and heroism which we call tragic drama is distinctive of the western tradition”.⁷⁹ In his opinion, we tend to forget that the idea of “re-enact[ing] private anguish on a public stage” (almost exclusively) belongs to ancient Greece and that, “nearly till the moment of their decline, the tragic forms are Hellenic”.⁸⁰ Steiner’s book, Felski observes, is informed by an elitist vision of tragedy, a prestigious literary genre defined “as an exalted form that transcends the mundane world of politics and concerns itself only with the loftiest of concerns”.⁸¹ Notably, he believes that the tragic flame “flare[s] up at only a few moments in time, such as fifth-century Athens and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century

⁷⁵ Porter, p. 69.

⁷⁶ “so far from being tragic, Nietzsche’s view of life is, on the contrary, one of tragedy averted. Reality’s ongoing redemption in appearances saves the metaphysics of *The Birth of Tragedy* from collapsing into unbridled pessimism. In this way tragedy no longer has to be the sign of nihilism and of oppressive fatalism (as it was, for instance, in Schopenhauer). Rather, it is the promise of aesthetic fullness and of a complex joy – even ecstasy – that is tinged (and so, too, heightened) with pain and loss. Pain and suffering are never a reason for despair: instead they are a motive for their own conversion into pleasure”. Porter, p. 74.

⁷⁷ George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963 [1961]), p. 3.

⁷⁸ Steiner, p. 3.

⁷⁹ Steiner, p. 3.

⁸⁰ Steiner, p. 3.

⁸¹ Felski, p. 4.

Europe. Even here, there are only a handful of works that are authentically tragic”.⁸² In Steiner’s terms,

there is in the final moments of great tragedy, whether Greek or Shakespearean or neoclassic, a fusion of grief and joy, of lament over the fall of man and of rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit. No other poetic form achieves this mysterious effect; it makes of *Oedipus*, *King Lear*, and *Phèdre* the noblest yet wrought by the mind. From antiquity until the age of Shakespeare and Racine, such accomplishment seemed within the reach of talent. Since then the tragic voice in drama is blurred or still.⁸³

It is interesting to note that Steiner’s formalist approach does not seem to have changed much since the Fifties, when he wrote *The Death of Tragedy*. In his recent essay “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered”, which authoritatively opens Felski’s collection *Rethinking Tragedy*, Steiner reassesses and essentially reaffirms his thesis. After stressing the indeterminacy of the noun ‘tragedy’ and of the adjective ‘tragic’, and the sterile elusiveness of any arbitrary definition, he attempts to offer “a minimal but indispensable core shared by ‘tragedies’ in literature and extending, by analogy, by related metaphor, to other expressive modes”.⁸⁴ In his opinion, “[t]his nucleus (*Urgrund*) is that of ‘original sin’”.⁸⁵ Because of this flaw, it might be argued that the human condition “is ontologically tragic, which is to say in essence”.⁸⁶ Therefore, for Steiner, “the axiomatic constant in tragedy is that of ontological homelessness”.⁸⁷ When he reflects on *The Death of Tragedy*, as Felski observes in her “Introduction”, Steiner “concedes that such a condition of fundamental estrangement and primordial suffering is not superseded by modernity” and “acknowledg[es] the historical variety and

⁸² Felski, p. 4.

⁸³ Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy*, p. 10.

⁸⁴ George Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered”, in *Rethinking Tragedy*, pp. 29-44 (p. 30).

⁸⁵ Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered”, p. 30.

⁸⁶ Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered”, p. 30.

⁸⁷ Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered”, p. 30.

fluctuation of tragic forms”.⁸⁸ Despite this seeming openness, though, he reiterates the idea that it is hardly surprising that what he terms “absolute or high tragedy [...] is rare”⁸⁹ (notably, according to Steiner, the only Shakespearean play that should be considered “uncompromisingly tragic” is *Timon of Athens*⁹⁰). What surprises him, instead, is the fact that absolute tragedies “have been composed and performed at all and that they contain some of the finest poetry and most acute philosophic, psychological insights accessible to the human mind”.⁹¹ Thus, more than forty years after the publication of his book, Steiner solemnly affirms that there are no reasons for him to change his mind: “I see not [*sic*] persuasive grounds on which to retract the case put in *The Death of Tragedy*, 1961 (now, if I may be forgiven for saying so, in its seventeenth language)”.⁹²

Steiner’s scepticism about the existence of tragedy in the modern period provoked Raymond Williams’s reaction in 1966.⁹³ In 1962, when his project was still at an embryonic stage, the eminent Welsh critic submitted a proposal of what would become *Modern Tragedy* to the London publisher Chatto & Windus, stressing its non-academic nature and structure. In this “unusual book”, as Williams writes, he “can’t [...] go back to straight professional literary criticism, and anyway that has abundantly proved it can’t handle tragedy”.⁹⁴ On the one hand, considering the long-standing interest in the tragic in literature and criticism, Pamela McCallum observes that Williams’s comment about this incapacity to deal with tragedy is “unquestionably

⁸⁸ Felski, p. 16.

⁸⁹ Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered”, p. 39.

⁹⁰ Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered”, p. 41.

⁹¹ Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered”, p. 40.

⁹² Steiner, “‘Tragedy,’ Reconsidered”, p. 44.

⁹³ See Drakakis and Conn Liebler, “Tradition and Innovation”, in *Tragedy*, pp. 141-2 (p. 142).

⁹⁴ Williams’s letter (20 July 1962) quoted in Pamela McCallum, “Introduction: Reading *Modern Tragedy* in the Twenty-First Century”, in Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (1966), ed. by Pamela McCallum (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Encore Editions, 2006), pp. 9-22 (p. 9).

puzzling”.⁹⁵ On the other hand, however, she suggests that his rebuke shows how forcefully he argues in favour of democratising an elitist genre: “any understanding of tragedy as a literary form cannot be separated from the use of tragedy to describe events encountered in everyday experience”.⁹⁶

In the opening pages of his seminal book, Williams affirms that the various uses of the term ‘tragedy’ are not necessarily in conflict. His reflections focus exactly on the cross-pollination of these multifaceted tragic instances: “[w]e come to tragedy by many roads. It is an immediate experience, a body of literature, a conflict of theory, an academic problem. This book is written from the point where the roads cross, in a particular life”.⁹⁷ From this demythologising perspective, Williams adds that – during his “ordinary life”⁹⁸ – he has known tragedy in various forms, underlining both the individual and the universal quality of tragic experience (“[i]t has not been the death of princes; it has been at once more personal and more general”).⁹⁹ For Williams, what is traditionally termed tragedy and the sphere of ordinary life are constantly interconnected. Indeed, he encourages the juxtaposition of the ‘vernacular’ usage of ‘tragedy’ with its literary/dramatic counterpart, pointing out that “[t]his coexistence of meanings seems to [him] quite natural, and there is no fundamental difficulty in both seeing their relations and distinguishing between them”.¹⁰⁰

As it denounces the academics’ tendency to “be impatient and even contemptuous of what they regard as loose and vulgar uses of ‘tragedy’ in ordinary

⁹⁵ McCallum, p. 9.

⁹⁶ McCallum, p. 10.

⁹⁷ Williams, p. 33.

⁹⁸ Williams, p. 33.

⁹⁹ Williams, p. 33.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, p. 34.

speech and in the newspapers”,¹⁰¹ *Modern Tragedy* seeks to explore the traditional (and conventional) distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ tragedy and, at the same time, “tr[ies], in different ways, to describe the relations and connections which this formal separation hides”.¹⁰² Moreover, what Williams aims to suggest is that tragic experience, acting as a mirror to ever changing human nature, “commonly attracts the fundamental beliefs and tensions of a period”.¹⁰³ For him, “tragic theory is interesting mainly in this sense, that through it the shape and set of a particular culture is often deeply realised”.¹⁰⁴ Far from reducing it to “a single and permanent kind of fact”,¹⁰⁵ Williams believes that tragedy should be defined as “a series of experiences and conventions and institutions”.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, in his opinion, tragedy should be context-specific rather than universalist: “the varieties of tragic experience are to be interpreted by reference to the changing conventions and institutions. The universalist character of most tragic theory is then at the opposite pole from our necessary interest”.¹⁰⁷ As previously said, this understanding of tragedy obviously contrasts with Steiner’s reactionary interpretation, defined by Sean Carney as “a kind of negative ideal that no existing play might actually fulfil but that can nevertheless be conceived of as an ur-form”.¹⁰⁸ If, for Williams, generic changes inevitably reflect societal shifts, Steiner firmly believes in an absolute and permanent kind of tragic aesthetics.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰¹ Williams, p. 34.

¹⁰² Williams, p. 35.

¹⁰³ Williams, p. 69.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, p. 69.

¹⁰⁵ Williams, p. 69.

¹⁰⁶ Williams, p. 69.

¹⁰⁷ Williams, p. 69.

¹⁰⁸ Sean Carney, *The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary English Tragedy* (Toronto, Buffalo and London: University of Toronto Press, 2013), p. 13.

¹⁰⁹ “emphasis upon the contingent nature of tragedy poses a serious challenge to the essentialist formalism of a writer such as Steiner, and proposes a different kind of history of the genre”. Drakakis and Conn Liebler, “Tradition and Innovation”, p. 142.

The prominent literary scholar and cultural theorist Terry Eagleton, like his Cambridge mentor Williams, savagely attacks the elitist approach of those he sardonically calls “the George Steiners of this world”.¹¹⁰ In his *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (2003), “an impressive, almost encyclopaedic”¹¹¹ examination of what he defines as “an unfashionable subject these days”,¹¹² Eagleton observes that the truthfulness of everyday tragedy openly defies social hierarchies. In his words:

Ordinary experience may be laced with a large dose of delusion, but it can also speak the truth. It is this which is overlooked by the elitists of tragedy, for whom only those perched loftily above the masses can pierce the veil of false consciousness and peer boldly into the abyss.¹¹³

Notably, in his sharp-tongued “Commentary” to *Rethinking Tragedy*, this committed supporter of a democratic tragic vision fiercely attacks Steiner’s “characteristically burnished, commanding piece of rhetoric”,¹¹⁴ defining his dogmatic writing style as “gnomic, mandarin, prophetic, magisterial, imperious, resonantly authoritative”, in other words “an exact imprint of his ideology”.¹¹⁵ Eagleton refutes Steiner’s reactionary (and decidedly gloomy) theory, pointing out that the age which for the critic marks the demise of tragedy “has in fact witnessed the renewal of it, however many languages Steiner may tell us his thesis has been translated into”.¹¹⁶

As Sean Carney notes, Williams and Eagleton throw light on “the dialectical action at the heart of the tragic in order to reveal the importance of tragedy for leftist politics”.¹¹⁷ If Williams focuses on this topic “because tragedy, emerging at moments of historical contradiction and change, thus serves as a sign of historical openness and

¹¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, “Commentary”, in *Rethinking Tragedy*, pp. 337-46 (pp. 337-8).

¹¹¹ Hugh Grady, “Tragedy and Materialist Thought”, in *A Companion to Tragedy*, pp. 128-44 (p. 129).

¹¹² Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Malden (MA), Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell, 2003), p. ix.

¹¹³ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 100.

¹¹⁴ Eagleton, “Commentary”, p. 344.

¹¹⁵ Eagleton, “Commentary”, p. 345.

¹¹⁶ Eagleton, “Commentary”, p. 341.

¹¹⁷ Carney, p. 11.

possibility”, Eagleton explores the tragic issue because he believes that “the dialectical aspects of tragedy have the potential to illuminate the contradictions of late capitalism within the contemporary moment”.¹¹⁸ From his cultural materialist perspective, Eagleton examines how left-wing critics have “given over discourse on the tragic to the Right, by dismissing or ignoring the term”¹¹⁹ instead of exploring its various instances and implications in our age. As the critic himself observes in *Sweet Violence*, with its “unsavoury aura of gods, myths and blood cults, metaphysical guilt and inexorable destiny”,¹²⁰ this “aristocrat among art forms”¹²¹ seems to be excessively “reactionary”¹²² for leftist thinkers, who tend to become suspicious of such a prestigious genre and react by rejecting it. In other words, if some conservative thinkers (such as Steiner) “have [...] decided that tragedy is no longer possible, [...] some radicals have concluded that it is no longer desirable”.¹²³ By contrast, Eagleton points out that “the left should not airily ditch the notion as antiquated and elitist”¹²⁴ and stresses the need for a wider understanding of tragedy, re-thinking those features which, despite “seem[ing] most alien and obsolete, [...] are surprisingly close to contemporary radical concerns”.¹²⁵ Eagleton’s *Sweet Violence*, as Hugh Grady has noted, aims not only to reassess the received discourse about tragedy, but also to show how the tragic is necessary to “grasp[] the sweep of history, the situation of humanity in the present, and the possibility of moving from this point”.¹²⁶ Like Williams, Eagleton argues that the twentieth century “was itself the most tragic of centuries and capitalism the most tragic

¹¹⁸ Carney, p. 11.

¹¹⁹ Grady, p. 129.

¹²⁰ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. ix.

¹²¹ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. ix.

¹²² Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. ix.

¹²³ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 21.

¹²⁴ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 22.

¹²⁵ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, p. 22.

¹²⁶ Grady, pp. 129-30.

of social arrangements”.¹²⁷ Thus, despite its inherent elusiveness and seeming obsolescence, the idea of tragedy should thus not be resisted, but explored and reconsidered, in that it has the remarkable capacity to hold a highly revealing mirror to our recent past and present.

¹²⁷ Grady, p. 130.

BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE:
THE POLITICS OF REWRITING ANCIENT TRAGEDY

Following two theoretical chapters on pivotal notions such as intertextuality, adaptation, tragedy, the tragic, and their various renditions, this section aims to provide a bridge between the theory and practice of rewriting Graeco-Roman tragedies in contemporary Britain. When we employ a term such as ‘rewriting’, Moraru suggests, it is important not to “be misled [...] by the delusively apish prefix *re*”.¹ Rewriting is neither a simply repetitive technique nor a neutral operation. Rather, this practice “is endowed with multiply transformative functions: textual, as it trans-forms the ‘model,’ but also ideological and political, cultural largely speaking”.² In our age of cultural recycling, therefore, rewriting does not merely refer to an imitative act – what Moraru calls “*underwriting*”, that is “support and reduplication of the already-written”.³ Various postmodern rewritings indeed strive to undermine the received discourse, being characterised by “a *counterwriting* distance, a ‘rupture’ between themselves and what they redo – the literary past – as well as between themselves and various hegemonic forces active at the moment and in the milieu of ‘redoing’”.⁴ In line with this idea of transformative rewriting, the three case studies examined in this thesis – as pointed out

¹ Christian Moraru, *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 9 [original emphasis].

² Moraru, p. 9.

³ Moraru, p. 9. [original emphasis].

⁴ Moraru, p. 9. [original emphasis].

in the Preface – provide significant examples of re-visionary (hyper)texts, which “enter[] an old text from a new critical direction”.⁵

1. REWORKING TRAGEDY: THREE POSSIBLE STRATEGIES

Exploring the transmigration of a classical source into contemporaneity and its socio-political implications is a complex and multi-layered process, which inevitably entails examining inter-cultural, inter-linguistic, and inter-generic dynamics. In this light, this doctoral dissertation draws upon some aspects of reception theory, in particular the stimulating work of Lorna Hardwick. As the British classicist suggests, Reception Studies “investigat[e] the routes by which a text has moved and the cultural focus which shaped or filtered the ways in which the text was regarded”.⁶ Even more interestingly, this emerging discipline not only “participate[s] in the continuous dialogue between the past and the present” but “also require[s] some ‘lateral’ dialogue in which crossing boundaries of place or language or genre is as important as crossing those of time”.⁷ In keeping with Hardwick’s advice, this section of the chapter seeks to identify and describe some possible strategies that can be adopted by contemporary writers in order to cross spatial, linguistic, and generic borders in their re-interpretations and re-creations of Greek and Roman tragedies.⁸

⁵ Adrienne Rich quoted in Peter Widdowson, *Literature* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 164.

⁶ Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4.

⁷ Hardwick, p. 4.

⁸ “[A]s a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-) creation”. Linda Hutcheon with Siobhan O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013 [2006]), p. 8 [original emphasis].

1.1 Rewriting and Restaging

If by ‘rewriting’ we mean both the adaptive process and the adapted product, at the same time, this term can indicate a set of fundamental textual strategies to transmigrate classical referents into new contexts. When a contemporary author (in our case, a British dramatist) approaches the classics, s/he often meets a significant linguistic challenge. Indeed, nowadays the vast majority of British rewritings of Graeco-Roman tragedies are commissioned works, which (at least initially) do not spring from a strong personal interest in the ancient world. Except for some distinguished writers with an outstanding classical education, such as Tony Harrison, or a handful of authors with a fascination for the classics, like Timberlake Wertenbaker, most contemporary British dramatists have, at best, a limited knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek. For this reason, when they grapple with a classical hypotext, they need to work from an English translation which, though extremely helpful, remains an intermediate text. For instance, when in the summer of 1992 Caryl Churchill planned to translate Seneca’s *Thyestes*, she used a 1912 “Loeb edition with Latin on one page and English opposite”.⁹ Although Churchill had studied Latin at school, when she “started getting interested in the language”, she strived “to get through the opaque screen that a translation can’t help being to see what Seneca had actually said”.¹⁰ Similarly, even if he can read some ancient Greek, the playwright, adapter, and translator Martin Crimp admits that he has to face exactly the same problem each time he translates from languages he does not understand, such as German or Russian. While for Churchill an intermediate translation is like an “opaque screen”, Crimp describes it as a steamy mirror:

⁹ Caryl Churchill, “Introduction”, in Seneca’s *Thyestes*, trans. by Caryl Churchill (London: Nick Hern Books, 1995), pp. vii-xiii (p. vii).

¹⁰ Churchill, p. vii.

I still have huge intellectual misgivings about working via an intermediate text because you don't get the buzz, you don't get the thrill of interacting with the original language. It is like you are shaving and the mirror is always steaming up and you're always having to wipe it so that you can see or otherwise you're going to cut yourself really badly. So there is a danger of cutting yourself if you work in this way.¹¹

The use of different translations may be a successful strategy to “get the buzz”, as Crimp puts it, and grasp the original meaning, as the Scottish dramatist Liz Lochhead suggests. When the director Graham McLaren asked her to adapt Euripides's *Medea* for his ‘Greeks’ project,¹² Lochhead “started off by reading all the versions” of the ancient tragedy

[she] could find. And the footnotes in English in the Greek editions arguing the nuances of particular words he [Euripides] used, trying to understand imperfectly, but as exactly as [she] could, what a particular argument was, the implications of the imagery he used – and to intuit its precise tone.¹³

The same happened with Lochhead's *Thebans* (2003), based on “the umpteen different translations” the adapter read, especially “unspeakable old Victorian ones with lots and lots of footnotes on the Greek”,¹⁴ which helped her to ‘enter’ the original. From that cross-pollination of translated texts, Lochhead created her own dramatic language to rewrite the Greeks for the contemporary Scottish stage. *Thebans* also shows another

¹¹ Quoted in Margherita Laera, “Theatre Translation as Collaboration: Aleks Sierz, Martin Crimp, Nathalie Abrahami, Colin Teevan, Zoë Svendsen and Michael Walton discuss Translation for the Stage”, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21 (2011) pp. 213-25 (p. 217).

¹² Lochhead's *Medea*, David Greig's *Oedipus the Visionary*, and Tom McGrath's *Electra* were “performed in sequence in Glasgow in 2000 by theatre babel [*sic*], directed by Graham McLaren, as a result of a commission to three leading Scottish playwrights to adapt classical texts in the light of the flourishing of theatre arts in the years before and following devolution and the re-convening of the Scottish Parliament after a gap of almost 300 years”. Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, pp. 79-80.

¹³ Liz Lochhead, “Foreword”, in Liz Lochhead after Euripides, *Medea* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2000), pp. v-vi (p. v).

¹⁴ Liz Lochhead, “A Note from the Playmaker”, in Liz Lochhead after Sophocles and Euripides, *Thebans: Oedipus Jokasta Antigone* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2003), page unnumbered. As the eminent theatre scholar and classicist J. Michael Walton points out, we have to bear in mind that any translation of an ancient play mirrors the idiosyncrasies of the period in which it was written: “what you notice with Greek and Roman tragedies and comedies is that they are tied to the translators' own period and language, not only to the spoken language, but to the theatrical language of the time in which they are written. And so you get your restoration translations, you get your eighteenth-century, then Victorian versions”. Quoted in Laera, “Theatre Translation as Collaboration”, p. 219.

possible rewriting strategy, what the playwright herself terms “conflation, and reduction”.¹⁵ This play indeed rearticulates in a single text the various Greek narratives about the Kingdom of Thebes, drawing on Sophocles’s so-called ‘Theban trilogy’ (*Oedipus The King*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*), Aeschylus’s *Seven against Thebes*, and Euripides’s *The Phoenician Women*. As Lochhead affirms, the fact of being an adapter rather than a translator, allows her considerable freedom, as is evident in this case, where she “was free to use whatever versions of the myths seemed to fit our purposes”.¹⁶

As previously discussed, the extensive taxonomy offered by Gérard Genette in *Palimpsestes* demonstrates that there are various (hyper)textual strategies that can be employed to rewrite a literary source. Focusing specifically on dramatic appropriations, Anette Pankratz – a German scholar working in the field of British Cultural Studies – describes four useful techniques (*anachronism*, *fusion*, *structural analogy*, and *meta-textuality*)¹⁷ adopted by contemporary British and Irish playwrights for their engagements with ancient myths. As far as the first strategy is concerned, “the mythical plot, the characters and the setting in a distant past are retained, but the text includes sporadic references to contemporary discourses”.¹⁸ “Taking anachronisms a step further”, she argues, “spatial and temporal fusions combine classical mythic with contemporary characters, settings and plots to a post-modern *bricolage*”.¹⁹ However, whereas anachronisms offer only “sporadic alienations, fusions permeate the whole

¹⁵ Lochhead, “A Note from the Playmaker”.

¹⁶ Lochhead, “A Note from the Playmaker”.

¹⁷ See Anette Pankratz, “Greek to Us? Appropriations of Myths in Contemporary British and Irish Drama”, in *Crossing Borders – Intercultural Drama and Theatre at the Turn of the Millennium* (Contemporary Drama in English 8), ed. by Bernhard Reitz and Alyce von Rothkirch (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001), pp. 151-163.

¹⁸ Pankratz, p. 151.

¹⁹ Pankratz, p. 153 [original emphasis].

text”.²⁰ It should also be noted that, if fusion reworks mythical narratives from the past, at the same time this strategy “shows its connection with the present and remythifies and sometimes ritualises present characters and practices”.²¹ Pankratz’s third rewriting technique, structural analogy, is more radical than anachronism(s) and fusion(s). While these two strategies tend to maintain essential features such as characters and plots, “structural analogies transfer the basic structure of myths to a contemporary setting with contemporary characters”.²² Pankratz concludes her article by elucidating what she dubs meta-text/meta-drama. As she puts it, “[i]n contrast to anachronisms, fusions and structural analogies, which cross the borders between past and present, meta-textual references discover borders to be the result of textualisation. Instead of crossing the borders, they elegantly deconstruct them”.²³

As with Genettian hypertextual practices, these possible rewriting techniques are not separate but generally interact within the same text. For instance, in Howard Barker’s *The Bite of the Night* (1988), “Brechtian alienation and the oscillation between past and present created by anachronisms partly intersect with concomitant effects by textual fusions”²⁴ while the latter, Pankratz adds, “go a step further [...] by deconstructing binaries and undermining all trans-historical and essentialist constructions”.²⁵ Similarly, in *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988), Timberlake Wertenbaker employs both anachronisms and meta-textual/meta-dramatic strategies, while Sarah Kane combines fusions with meta-reflections in *Phaedra’s Love* (1996).²⁶

²⁰ Pankratz, p. 153.

²¹ Pankratz, p. 153.

²² Pankratz, p. 156.

²³ Pankratz, p. 158.

²⁴ Pankratz, p. 152.

²⁵ Pankratz, p. 152.

²⁶ See Pankratz, p. 152, pp. 159-60.

So far, this section has dealt (almost exclusively) with textual strategies. However, as is well known, drama and theatre are two sides of the same coin, and this relationship constitutes a further complication. The close link between dramatic and theatrical aspects is pointed out by Keir Elam in his seminal *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*: “the researcher in theatre and drama is faced with two quite dissimilar – although intimately correlated – types of textual material: that produced *in* the theatre and that composed *for* the theatre”.²⁷ The complexities of this two-faced nature are equally clear to reception scholars. In this respect, Lorna Hardwick identifies “two aspects of staging which raise crucial issues for reception studies”.²⁸ First, “staging implies a live performance, a live audience. Each live performance is different and it is impossible to recapture it to allow the kind of analysis and debate about an established ‘text’ that is possible when discussing a poem or a painting”.²⁹ In addition to “the transitory character of theatrical performance”,³⁰ for Hardwick the second pivotal feature in Reception Studies “is the relationship between text and performance [...] [which] has become the dominant factor in the approach to drama in its ancient context”.³¹

Staging an ancient tragedy or a contemporary reworking of a tragic hypotext today undeniably presents a significant challenge. Adopting a useful “problem-based”³² approach, in *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today* (2007), Simon Goldhill examines

²⁷ Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, 2nd edn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2002 [1980]), p. 3 [original emphasis].

²⁸ Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, p. 51.

²⁹ Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, p. 51.

³⁰ Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, p. 51.

³¹ Hardwick, *Reception Studies*, p. 54.

³² Simon Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), p. 3.

what he defines as “the six most pressing problems that face any company that chooses to produce a Greek tragedy”.³³

The first issue is theatrical space. It is important to bear in mind that Greek tragedy was conceived for a very specific kind of theatrical space, “fully built into the writing of Greek plays. The internal dynamics of each play will be lost in performance if the logic of this spatial organization is ignored”.³⁴ As Goldhill suggests, today’s directors (and dramatists) should not aim “to reproduce the conditions of ancient theater but to see how the modern theater can respond to the vividly constructed spatial dynamics of the old plays”.³⁵ For instance, among others, Euripides’s *Medea* is a tragedy that fully exploits the spatial resources of ancient theatre. One of the original features that a contemporary production should not overlook is the sense of the inside and the outside, of the domestic and the public sphere. In Deborah Warner’s *Medea*, staged at the Queen’s Theatre, London, in 2001, this evocative distinction was maintained and effectively re-articulated. However, ignoring the vertical axis of the end of Euripides’s play (*Medea*, like a *deus ex machina*, appears above the house carrying her children’s corpses on a chariot), Warner’s version failed to address the problem of power relations. On the contrary, Jonathan Kent’s 1992 production of Euripides’s tragedy, starring Diana Rigg, respected the height of the set, rising the *dominatrix* above her humiliated husband Jason.³⁶

The second aspect is the chorus, probably the most distinctive element of Greek tragedy and, at the same time, “the most vexing for any modern company”.³⁷ For Goldhill, Lee Breuer’s New York production of *The Gospel at Colonus* (1985), a gospel

³³ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 2.

³⁴ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 7.

³⁵ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 44.

³⁶ See Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, pp. 21-25.

³⁷ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 45.

reworking of Sophocles's tragedy *Oedipus at Colonus* including excerpts from *Antigone*, provides an outstanding example of "a completely integral and brilliantly effective use of the chorus".³⁸ In Breuer's appropriation, the chorus was mainly played by a gospel choir, which – singing and interacting as a group – reinforced the sense of community. In his 2004 rewriting of Sophocles's *Women of Trachis*, Martin Crimp took a different approach by 'atomising' the collective voice. As will be later discussed, Crimp affirms that staging this key element of ancient tragedy poses a thorny problem and offers a convincing explanation lying in the fragmentation of today's society. However, the chorus should not be defined exclusively as an intractable problem. Rather, contemporary writers and practitioners should be aware that this classical feature can also "be an extraordinary and thrilling theatrical resource".³⁹

The third problem that Goldhill's study addresses is the actor's role. Focusing on three main categories (physical action, tragic speech, and characterisation), he suggests "some routes through to a more satisfying experience in rehearsal and onstage".⁴⁰ As he also observes, with its "long, rhetorical speeches interspersed with neat one-line exchanges"⁴¹ and philosophical or political resonances, Greek tragedy tends to be "a disconcerting experience"⁴² for contemporary actors used to contemporary theatrical techniques and roles. In this regard, the words of the actress Fiona Shaw, who played Electra in Warner's 1988 production of the eponymous tragedy, give us a sense of the physical and mental exhaustion that acting in tragedy entails: "I was physically wrecked from it – lame, thin, ill. You're psychically playing with illness, starvation, and burning

³⁸ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 56.

³⁹ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 79.

⁴⁰ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 82.

⁴¹ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 81.

⁴² Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 81.

up enormous intellectual energy. It didn't do me any good, that. It did my soul good, but I don't think it did my body any good".⁴³

The fourth question is the relationship between (Greek) tragedy and politics, one of the main concerns of this thesis. In Goldhill's opinion, Greek tragedy has "become such a hot property"⁴⁴ in recent years thanks to the contemporary appeal of its "political thrust".⁴⁵ As he states, its focus on

the violence that emerges from the pursuit of justice, on the corruption of power in the pursuit of war, on the humiliations and misplaced confidence of the aftermath of military victory, on the battleground of gender within social order, seems to speak directly to the most pressing and dismaying of contemporary concerns.⁴⁶

Although the politics of tragedy is a complex matter, as we will see later in this dissertation, the inherent capacity of this art form to disclose and stage "the fissures and tensions in political idealism, political power, and even political hope, is rare in the public discourse of the modern world, and for that reason all the more needed today".⁴⁷

Because of its textual core, the fifth category examined by Goldhill, that is translation, has already been tackled and included in the (sub)section on rewriting strategies. However, it may be worth stressing, as he suggests, that this issue is equally pertinent to the *mise en scène* itself: "[a] translation is often the starting point of a production, and it will have profound implications for the style of the performance".⁴⁸

The last problem identified by Goldhill in *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today* is the onstage representation of unfamiliar and odd characters typical of antiquity, such as gods, ghosts, monsters, and heroes. As we will see, Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* revolves

⁴³ Quoted in Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 116.

⁴⁴ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 120.

⁴⁵ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 120.

⁴⁶ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 120.

⁴⁷ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 152.

⁴⁸ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 184.

around the collapse of Heracles, one of the most celebrated heroes of antiquity, and interweaves ancient suffering with its modern reverberations. Even if Crimp's rewriting "inevitably played down the divine and supernatural elements" of the Sophoclean text, in Godhill's words, "it made for a fine and moving drama".⁴⁹

Finally, before moving to relocation strategies and techniques, it is worth focusing on the use of masks as a distinctive feature of performance in Graeco-Roman antiquity. The theatre scholar Gregory McCart, who has worked and experimented with masks for fifteen years (both as a director and an actor), stresses the scarcity of reliable information on this aspect: "[w]e are frustrated by the paucity of evidence relating to why it [the mask] was adopted and how it functioned".⁵⁰ Obviously, it is not possible to reproduce the original conditions of an ancient *mise en scène*; however, thanks to various productions/workshops of tragedy and comedy, McCart has realised that "particular aspects of those performances could be tested in isolation".⁵¹ As he observes, masked acting poses an enormous challenge to today's actors, "demand[ing] that [they] work at the limit of their vocal and physical energies".⁵² By contrast, their ancient Greek colleagues were born into a mask-based theatrical culture, therefore it was clearly easier for them to cope with technical difficulties and physical efforts: "[t]hey witnessed performances in mask and as trained performers it was the only option available to them. Acting was masked acting. They did not need to unlearn naturalistic techniques".⁵³ As for masked performance in ancient Rome, McCart notes that "[t]he theatre of the Roman Empire was eclectic and multi-faceted, incorporating mime,

⁴⁹ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 201.

⁵⁰ Gregory McCart, "Masks in Greek and Roman Theatre", in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, ed. by Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 247-67 (p. 247).

⁵¹ McCart, p. 247.

⁵² McCart, p. 248.

⁵³ McCart, p. 248.

spectacle, recitations, literary drama, and comedy. The mask seems to have figured in most of these entertainments”.⁵⁴ Although we do not find any mention of masked acting in the surviving comedies by Plautus and Terence, their deep admiration for the Greek playwright Menander probably prevented them from “ignor[ing] what was such a vital theatrical component in the production of their mentor’s plays”.⁵⁵ While the comic mask typical of New Comedy became more naturalistic, “the open-mouthed tragic mask became more stylized in a way that served both Roman tragedy and theatre architecture”.⁵⁶ Even if they re-(en)vision Greek sources and models, Seneca’s tragedies “do[] not rely on stage management but on its literary qualities and the demonstrable power of recitation”.⁵⁷ Many scholars indeed argue that “[i]t is highly doubtful that Seneca’s plays were ever performed in public, masked or unmasked”.⁵⁸ Interestingly, according to the rhetorician Lucian, the open-mouthed mask deriving from Greek comedy and tragedy were not universally appreciated in Rome because of its frightening physiognomy, whereas the close-mouthed masks of pantomime seemed to be more appreciated. In any case, it is appropriate to say that “[m]ask-making was quite an industry in ancient Rome”,⁵⁹ as the innumerable reproductions of histrionic masks on a wide range of objects and monuments demonstrate. Remarkably, this widespread (visual and material) replication plays a fundamental role within Reception Studies, “bequeath[ing] to posterity the enduring symbols of theatre itself: the grieving mask of tragedy and the grinning mask of comedy”.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ McCart, p. 262.

⁵⁵ McCart, p. 263.

⁵⁶ McCart, p. 263.

⁵⁷ McCart, p. 264.

⁵⁸ McCart, p. 264.

⁵⁹ McCart, p. 265.

⁶⁰ McCart, p. 266.

The most representative and outstanding example of the use of masks in twentieth-century British theatre is probably Peter Hall's *Oresteia*. This famous production, based on Tony Harrison's translation of Aeschylus's source, was staged at the National Theatre in 1981 and broadcast by Channel 4 in 1983. As pointed out by Harrison in the published script, the text "was written to be performed, a rhythmic libretto for masks, music, and an all-male company".⁶¹ Being a trilogy, each of the tragic plays forming the *Oresteia* has a different chorus and various *dramatis personae*. Jocelyn Herbert designed individual masks for the main characters, whereas each actor in the three separate choruses wore the same kind of face cover.⁶² As earlier stressed, masked acting is extremely demanding and requires a considerable amount of effort:

It took a good number of weeks in rehearsal to become accustomed to the brute object itself, and it was striking that the actor Greg Hicks, who played Orestes, managed to develop a stunning expressiveness by the use of gesture and the angling of the mask into and out of the light that few other members of the cast achieved.⁶³

Thanks to a fruitful collaboration with Peter Hall, Greg Hicks has continued to explore the enormous potential of this ancient device, investigating body language and even incorporating exotic dance and martial arts into his acting practice. As a result, in 2009 he presented *In Blood* at the Arcola Theatre, a *capoeira*-styled appropriation of Euripides's *Bacchae*, which provides a significant example of the experimental and hybrid form that a Greek tragedy can assume today.

⁶¹ Harrison quoted in Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 229.

⁶² Oliver Taplin, "'The Oresteia' (1981): The Use of Masks" (available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xR1eN3JJuak>, last accessed 15 October 2015).

⁶³ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 62.

1.2 Relocating

To a greater or lesser extent, the practices of rewriting and restaging a pre-existing artefact imply some sort of movement, or – more technically – relocation. At a first level, translation is an inter-linguistic (and inter-cultural) journey from “the source (con)text” to “the target (con)text”.⁶⁴ More specifically, as Laera notes (by reference to the theatre theorist Patrice Pavis), translation for the stage “involves a *transfer* of culture, in both its textual and its gestural codes”.⁶⁵ In other words, the complex process of transplanting plays “from culture to culture is seen not just as a question of translating the text, but of conveying its meaning and adapting it to its new cultural environment so as to create new meanings”.⁶⁶ As previously said, the strategies of domestication and foreignisation are considered especially suitable for these dramatic and theatrical transmigrations. In this light, circumscribing the field of inquiry, the translator theorist Gunilla Anderman describes the two basic approaches to the translation of European drama for the English stage: “either the translator brings the playwright to the audience, that is, the text is Anglicised; or alternatively, all foreign aspects of the play are left intact and the English audience is asked to travel abroad”.⁶⁷

If relocation usually refers to the transposition of the (hypo)text, the idea of a ‘transfer movement’ can also be applied to the figure of the source dramatist (metaphorically brought by the theatre translator to the spectators) and to the receiving audience (invited to cross spatial and cultural borders). Therefore, we can affirm that

⁶⁴ Laera, “Theatre Translation as Collaboration”, p. 214.

⁶⁵ Laera, “Theatre Translation as Collaboration”, p. 213 [my emphasis].

⁶⁶ Hanna Scolnicov, “Introduction”, in *The Play Out of Context: Transferring Plays from Culture to Culture*, ed. by Hanna Scolnicov and Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 1-6 (p. 1).

⁶⁷ Gunilla Anderman, *Europe on Stage: Translation and Theatre* (London: Oberon Books, 2005), p. 8.

dramatic/theatrical relocation operates at different levels and involves various categories, including the dramatic/performance text; the *mise en scène*; the source playwright; the translator or adapter; and the receiving audience).

After these introductory considerations, it is useful to focus on the specific practice that, in *Palimpsestes*, Genette terms *transposition diégétique* or *transdiégétisation*, which well exemplifies relocation. Starting from his definition of *diégèse*, that is “l’univers spatio-temporel désigné par le récit”⁶⁸ or – in other words – the “cadre historico-géographique”,⁶⁹ Genette shows how “une action peut être transposée d’une diégèse dans une autre, par exemple d’une époque à une autre, ou d’un lieu à un autre, ou les deux à la fois”.⁷⁰ As he points out, on the one hand, a diegetic transposition entails “inévitablement et nécessairement quelques transpositions pragmatiques”.⁷¹ However, on the other hand, “il faudra sans doute retenir, pour la caractériser, d’autres éléments que le seul cadre historique ou géographique”.⁷² Genette then distinguishes between “transformations *homodiégétiques*” and “transformations *hétérodiégétiques*”.⁷³ The first category includes “toutes les tragédies classiques qui reprennent un sujet mythologique ou historique, et même si à d’autres égards elles transforment largement ce sujet ; les pièces modernes du même genre, et souvent sur les mêmes sujets [...] et par définition toutes les transformations quantitatives”.⁷⁴ The French theorist also asserts that, in this case, the characters’ names (and, consequently, their identities) are maintained as almost unmistakable signs of “fidélité diégétique”.⁷⁵ By contrast, in heterodiegetic transpositions “l’action change de cadre, et les

⁶⁸ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 341.

⁶⁹ Genette, p. 343.

⁷⁰ Genette, p. 343.

⁷¹ Genette, p. 343.

⁷² Genette, p. 343.

⁷³ Genette, p. 343 [original emphasis].

⁷⁴ Genette, p. 344.

⁷⁵ Genette, p. 344.

personnages qui la supportent changent d'identité".⁷⁶ It should be noted that a diegetic transposition perfectly exemplifies how a multi-layered strategy such as relocation works. First, the hypertextual transplant of classical referents into a modern or contemporary context always implies a *dislocation* of the source from its original context of production. Secondly, at a deeper structural level, what Genette calls *transdiégétisation* implies a (more or less radical) departure from its original *diégèse*. It follows that relocation and subsequent rewriting (and, in the case of plays, restaging) are meaningful operations which, as the case studies in this dissertation will demonstrate, have inherently political implications both from a textual perspective and a performative point of view.

1.3 Remediating

In the first chapter of *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon points out that adaptive practices often entail the use of different media and codes:

[i]n many cases, because adaptations are to a different medium, they are *re-mediations*, that is, specifically translations in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (for example, words) to another (for example, images). This is translation but in a very specific sense: as transmutation or transcoding, that is, as necessarily a recoding into a new set of conventions as well as signs.⁷⁷

Hutcheon borrows the term 'remediation' from Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, whose landmark study *Remediation: Understanding New Media* was published in 1999. There, the two scholars state that they "have adopted" this word – deriving from the Latin verb *remederi* (to heal) – "to express the way in which one medium is seen by our

⁷⁶ Genette, p. 344.

⁷⁷ Hutcheon with O'Flynn, p. 16 [my emphasis].

culture as reforming or improving upon another”.⁷⁸ Even if the (sub)title of their study draws the readers’ attention to contemporary media, Bolter and Grusin are fully aware that remediation is a long-established phenomenon that “did not begin with the introduction of digital media”,⁷⁹ but rather “can [be] identif[ied] [...] throughout the last several hundred years of Western visual representation”.⁸⁰ Aptly, from Graham Allen’s intertextual perspective, “[r]emediation [...] appears like a transposition of the concept of intertextuality onto the level of media design and analysis”.⁸¹ In keeping with this, Bolter and Grusin examine the ongoing dialogue between digital media and earlier ones, stressing the network-like nature of (inter)mediation and its social-economic implications:

[n]o medium today, and certainly no single media event, seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces. What is new about new media comes from the particular ways in which they refashion older media and the ways in which older media refashion themselves to answer the challenges of new media.⁸²

Remarkably, what Bolter and Grusin term ‘remediation’ has become an effective strategy to rework ancient materials. As Lorna Hardwick argues in her *Translating Words, Translating Cultures*, inter-generic translation/adaptation and remediation are increasingly common practices to transplant Graeco-Roman sources into contemporaneity. She illustrates her point with some significant examples of this peculiar kind of transmigration:

[r]ecent work in both poetry and theatre has involved ‘genre cross-over’, particularly from epic to lyric (in the poems of Michael Longley) and to dramatic monologue (Carol Ann Duffy), from epic to stage drama (in the work of Peter Oswald, Botho Strauss and Derek Walcott on the *Odyssey*), from poem

⁷⁸ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 1999), p. 59.

⁷⁹ Bolter and Grusin, p. 11.

⁸⁰ Bolter and Grusin, p. 11.

⁸¹ Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, 2nd edn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011[2000]), p. 214.

⁸² Bolter and Grusin, p. 15.

to physical theatre (Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid*, staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company) and from drama to film poem (or verse film) in Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*.⁸³

As Hardwick adds, Tony Harrison's "crossover raises the further question of the impact of twentieth-century technology on translational possibilities, an aspect highlighted in the experiments with video and multi-media techniques".⁸⁴ Undoubtedly the most experimental case study examined in this dissertation, Harrison's interventionist rewriting of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* not only displaces and relocates the Titan's myth to twentieth-century industrial Britain and Europe, but also transmigrates it from stage to screen through poetry. This verse-film is thus a unique form of intersemiotic translation of Greek tragedy through the cross-fertilisation of (poetic) words and (cinematic) images. Another appropriate example of inter-media transplant of the classics is Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Dianeira*, a radio adaptation of Sophocles's *Trachiniae*, first broadcast on BBC Radio 3 in 1999.⁸⁵ This rewriting shows how the specificity of the medium affects the aesthetics of the (re)mediated work: having no visual component, radio operates exclusively at an aural level, and this fact has a crucial bearing on Wertenbaker's rewriting. The auditory dimension of this medium and the author's penchant for storytelling seem thus to be entirely in keeping with the peculiar narrative structure of *Dianeira*. Featuring – among other characters – Wertenbaker herself and the figure of a blind storyteller named Irene, this audio play emblematically "included a narrative within a narrative to explain the relationship between the authors, the story-teller and the play".⁸⁶

⁸³ Lorna Hardwick, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* (London: Duckworth, 2000), p. 113.

⁸⁴ Hardwick, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures*, p. 113.

⁸⁵ Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Dianeira*, in Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Plays Two: The Break of Day, After Darwin, Credible Witness, The Ash Girl, Dianeira*, Introduced by the author (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), pp. 321-74.

⁸⁶ Hardwick, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures*, p. 114.

2. TRAGEDY AND POLITICS

2.1 Theatre and Politics

What do we mean by the term ‘politics’ in the specific field of drama and theatre? In his concise but stimulating book *Theatre & Politics* (2009), Joe Kelleher argues that the search for a satisfactory formulation of this multi-layered concept

is going to turn up a range of different understandings, depending for instance on whether the term is taken to refer to the activities of government and other social systems and organizations, or the *study* of such activities and systems, or the processes by which power is distributed – and struggled over – in society more generally.⁸⁷

Aptly, Kelleher starts his discussion by providing the reader with a definition by Stefan Collini, which proves especially suitable for an analysis of the ongoing dialectics between theatre and politics. In his article “On Variousness; and on Persuasion”, published in the *New Left Review* in 2004, Collini defined politics as “the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space”.⁸⁸ Kelleher finds this formulation is “valuable”⁸⁹ for several reasons. First, Collini focuses on “questions of power and relations”.⁹⁰ Secondly, he implies that “shaping and determining these questions is not straightforward and is likely to be contested”.⁹¹ Thirdly, “the process of politics” can be defined as “ongoing”, or even “endless”.⁹² But most importantly, although Collini is not concerned with theatrical issues, his idea of “a given space” seems to be particularly relevant to an examination of the relationship

⁸⁷ Joe Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2 [original emphasis].

⁸⁸ Quoted in Kelleher, p. 3.

⁸⁹ Kelleher, p. 3.

⁹⁰ Kelleher, p. 3.

⁹¹ Kelleher, p. 3.

⁹² Kelleher, p. 3.

between theatre and politics, whose focus perpetually oscillates “between the ‘given’ space of the theatrical stage and the imagined space of the outside world, which the stage-play world of the theatre relates to in so many complex ways”.⁹³ As I discussed in the section of my Introduction dealing with the link between contemporary British theatre and society, the theatrical arena provides an ideal locus for a dialectical encounter between this (onstage) ‘given space’ and the offstage dimension. Moreover, since the “[t]heatre’s context and referent is the world”,⁹⁴ Amelia Howe Kritzer suggests that all theatre, in a sense, can be defined as political. As the British playwright and theatre theorist John McGrath states in his *Naked Thoughts that Roam About: Wrestling with Theatre, 1959-2001*, “[t]here is no such thing as a de-politicized world”⁹⁵ and, consequently, it might be argued that a de-politicized kind of theatre cannot exist.

Exploring the interplay between the interwoven dimensions of micro- and macro-politics, this thesis draws upon the idea of the study of politics as the determination and investigation of power relations in a given *locus*. Theatrical space is indeed a delimited area within which performers reproduce the power dynamics of the external world in the presence of a community of spectators. (Re)enacting the offstage reality and conjuring up the intersections between personal and public issues in front of a social body, theatre constitutes a communal and public art form, which can be considered inherently political, to a larger or lesser extent. Though this does not mean that theatrical practice is the only art form with strong political implications, it can hardly be denied that it provides us with “a unique forum for the political by involving

⁹³ Kelleher, p. 3.

⁹⁴ Amelia Howe Kritzer, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing: 1995-2005* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 1.

⁹⁵ Quoted in Kritzer, p. 1.

audiences in a perceptible, if ephemeral, social reality through the operation of its conventions”.⁹⁶

2.2 Greek Tragedy and Politics

In the opening paragraph of her study of political theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain, Kritzer underlines the intrinsic relationship between the ‘given space’ of the stage and a larger (but equally circumscribed) space, that is the *polis*: “Theatre’s most basic political potential lies in its paradigmatic relationship to the polis: within theatre’s space, assembled citizens view and consider representations of their world enacted for them in the immediacy of live performance”.⁹⁷ This close connection between the theatrical production and the civic dimension in which it is embedded is probably the most appropriate starting point for a discussion of the political potential and implications of tragedy. If we shift our focus to theatre in ancient Greece and Rome, it is nearly impossible to approach this topic without examining its socio-political dimension. Since these two contexts have their own peculiarities, it will be useful, at this stage, to offer some considerations on their specific traits in both areas separately.

Nearly all of the surviving Greek tragedies were originally staged in late fifth-century Athens at the festival held in honour of the god Dionysus, known as Great (or City) Dionysia, “before a huge citizen-audience who constituted a significant proportion of the city’s direct democracy”.⁹⁸ Though Deborah Boedeker and Kurt Raaflaub have correctly pointed out that the exact distribution of the performances “over four or five

⁹⁶ Kritzer, p. 1.

⁹⁷ Kritzer, p. 1.

⁹⁸ Jon Hesk, “The Socio-Political Dimension of Ancient Tragedy”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, pp. 72-92 (p. 73).

days is much debated”,⁹⁹ scholars seem to agree that the tragic competition lasted three days. Each of the three shortlisted dramatists presented three tragedies followed by a satyr play (“a kind of burlesque on a mythical subject”¹⁰⁰), the so-called ‘tetralogy’. Significantly, the three playwrights participating in the contest, as Goldhill makes clear, “were selected by the state (the *polis*), and full financial support for the production was provided by an individual sponsor, again chosen to shoulder this considerable tax burden by the state”.¹⁰¹ Even poorer citizens were actively encouraged to attend the performances: a public fund was introduced precisely to pay for entrance tickets for anyone who could not afford them. In essence, in fifth-century Athens, “[g]oing to the theater was a mass, civic occasion, fully supported by the state”.¹⁰²

The communal, participatory, and ‘egalitarian’ nature of the City Dionysia, “part and parcel of what it meant to be an Athenian”,¹⁰³ starkly contrasts with the entertainment-oriented and profit-making idea of theatre “as ‘show-business’, where ‘show’ represents one way (among many) of passing time, and ‘business’ indicates one way (among many) of making or losing money”.¹⁰⁴ While, nowadays, West End and Broadway theatres mainly seek to attract spectators and sell their theatrical product, in classical Athens theatrical performances were ‘democratically’ offered to a large public “as truly a civic event”.¹⁰⁵ Boedeker and Raaflaub observe that the audience of these festivals “consisted mostly of male citizens but included also resident aliens (*metics*),

⁹⁹ Deborah Boedeker and Kurt Raaflaub, “Tragedy and City”, in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. by Rebecca Bushnell (Malden (MA), Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 109-27 (p. 113). Boedeker and Raaflaub argue that “[w]hatever the exact program, it seems that comedies preceded tragedies” (p. 113), while Rush Rehm states that “[t]he final day of performances was dedicated to comedy, with five playwrights presenting a single play each” (“Festivals and Audiences in Athens and Rome”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, pp. 184-201 (p. 187)).

¹⁰⁰ Boedeker and Raaflaub, p. 112.

¹⁰¹ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, pp. 120-1.

¹⁰² Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 121.

¹⁰³ Rehm, p. 188.

¹⁰⁴ Rehm, p. 188.

¹⁰⁵ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 123.

foreign visitors, and probably some women and slaves”.¹⁰⁶ In actual fact, it should be stressed that the female presence is an issue “on which there is no scholarly consensus”.¹⁰⁷ Even so, we can assume that the fifth-century audience “was a large and mixed body of people from almost all walks of Greek life, of which Athenian citizens together with their sons – future citizens – made up the largest component, and foreigners a noticeable minority”.¹⁰⁸ Remarkably, these festivals gathered huge crowds of spectators around a theatrical space which depicted the *polis* and its socio-political stratification in a unique way. As Goldhill puts it:

There were perhaps fourteen thousand people present – more citizens gathered together than at any other point in the calendar, except for the most cataclysmic battles. The theater seating displayed the organization of the state: political groups, age classes, outsiders. It was not only the plays which represented the city to itself.¹⁰⁹

Despite such inevitable class divisions, the essential aim of the annual festival during which tragedies were staged was to celebrate, solidify, and strengthen the *polis*, as represented, “both in quantity and distribution”,¹¹⁰ by the audience. Therefore, it can be argued that the notions of “[p]olis, theater community, and stage were deeply interconnected” in fifth-century Athens.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ Boedeker and Raaflaub, p. 112. As far as the composition of the audience is concerned, Boedeker and Raaflaub draw on sources such as Eric Csapo and William J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), pp. 286-7; Simon Goldhill, “Representing Democracy: Women and the Great Dionysia”, in *Ritual, Finance, Politics: Essays Presented to David Lewis*, ed. by Robin Osborne and Simon Hornblower (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 347-69; Alan H. Sommerstein, “The Theatre Audience, the *Demos*, and the *Suppliants* of Aeschylus”, in *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, ed. by Christopher Pelling (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 63-79.

¹⁰⁷ David M. Carter, *The Politics of Greek Tragedy* (Exeter: Bristol Phoenix Press, 2007), p. 15.

¹⁰⁸ Carter, pp. 15-16.

¹⁰⁹ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 121.

¹¹⁰ Boedeker and Raaflaub, p. 112.

¹¹¹ Boedeker and Raaflaub, p. 112.

2.3 Roman Tragedy and Politics

The Italian classicist Alessandro Schiesaro opens his essay on Roman tragedy by stating that this genre “has the rare, if dubious, distinction of boasting a canonical birthdate”.¹¹² Indeed, the year 240 BCE is conventionally considered the starting point of Roman drama and, according to some scholars, we might even argue that it coincides with the dawn of Latin literature. In any case, it is reasonable to assume that the first Roman play, staged in this year, was a tragedy translated into Latin from a Greek source and staged at the *Ludi Romani*, one of the oldest festivals held in ancient Rome, to celebrate the victory over Carthage. Interestingly, it was the *semigraecus* Lucius Livius Andronicus, born in Magna Graecia and probably captured at the siege of Tarentum, who translated, staged, and acted in this play, thus becoming the founding father of Roman tragedy.¹¹³ All the tragedies subsequently written by Livius were “Latin adaptations of Greek originals, an appropriation of Greek plots, dramatic forms and metres for a Roman audience”.¹¹⁴ However, as Schiesaro observes, various theatrical practices

flourished in Rome and other parts of Italy well before that date [240] [...], and the development of Roman tragedy should thus be contextualized both within the development of a distinctive local culture, and within the polymorphous vicissitudes of postclassical Greek theater, to which the outlying parts of the Greek-speaking world continued to give their own vital contribution (Greek influence on Roman culture had been developing for centuries).¹¹⁵

If, on the one hand, Roman tragedy develops in a specific context with its local peculiarities, on the other, the profound impact of Greek tragedy and culture on its

¹¹² Alessandro Schiesaro, “Roman Tragedy”, in *A Companion to Tragedy*, pp. 269-86 (p. 269).

¹¹³ See Anthony James Boyle, *An Introduction to Roman Tragedy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 27-28.

¹¹⁴ Boyle, p. 28.

¹¹⁵ Schiesaro, p. 269.

development and socio-political implications should not be overlooked. Indeed, as Jon Hesk underlines, “[t]he social-political significance of ancient tragedy after the fourth century BC is bound up with the appropriation of Greek culture in the early Roman Republic and the enduring appeal of Greek tragic paradigms under the Roman emperors”.¹¹⁶

It should be noted that, when they approach both Greek postclassical tragedy and Roman Republican tragedy and seek to retrace their transformations, scholars “are severely hampered by the need to rely upon scarce, usually short fragments of what must have been a rich and varied corpus”.¹¹⁷ However, as Schiesaro adds, we should not “infer from these accidents of transmission the subordinate position of tragedy *vis-à-vis* comedy in the Roman literary system, or to presume that Roman tragedians failed to innovate or compete with their models”.¹¹⁸ Rather, the leading tragedians in Republican Rome (Livius, Naevius, Ennius, Pacuvius, and Accius) translated, appropriated, and re-(en)visioned Greek antecedents in a “creative, selective and inevitably political”¹¹⁹ fashion. With its strong “political and ideological vibrancy”,¹²⁰ Republican tragedy was able to rewrite and restage its Greek models and to translate them into “an art form that spoke directly to, and perhaps questioned or meditated upon, the nature and values of *Romanitas*”.¹²¹ The construction of Roman identity was the core of a Greek-style kind of tragedy inspired by mythical narratives, the so-called *cothurnata* (the term derives from *cothurnus*, buskins). This subgenre effectively highlights the importance of the ongoing dialogue between the Roman tragic output and its Greek sources. Another

¹¹⁶ Hesk, p. 86.

¹¹⁷ Schiesaro, p. 270.

¹¹⁸ Schiesaro, p. 271.

¹¹⁹ Hesk, p. 87.

¹²⁰ Hesk, p. 86.

¹²¹ Hesk, p. 86.

popular type of Republican tragedy was known as *praetexta* (the toga worn by magistrates), a different kind of tragic drama “deal[ing] with episodes from Rome’s legendary past or contemporary history with a clear didactic purpose”.¹²²

However, when we think of Roman tragedy, we immediately associate it with the name of the Stoic philosopher, politician, and playwright Seneca, whose dramatic texts may be seen both as “the crowning glory of Roman tragedy – and its swan song”.¹²³ Notably, even if they are the only Roman tragedies which have survived in full, we have to bear in mind that Seneca’s dramatic output coincides with the sunset of Roman theatre. Not surprisingly, the fact of being simultaneously the highest expression and final instance of Roman tragedy, as well as the only fully preserved tragic corpus, puts Seneca’s drama in a unique position. Just as intriguing is the idea that there is no consensus on the question of the performability and staging of these plays. As Ley notes: “[i]t remains uncertain whether the tragedies of Seneca were composed for public recitation, private reading and circulation, performance in excerpts or in private houses, or for the Roman public theatres”.¹²⁴ Although Senecan tragedies “lack all traces of production history”¹²⁵ and tend to be defined by many scholars as a form of closet drama, “political and social-contextual readings of [them], can be, and have been, produced”.¹²⁶ Indeed, the vicious political universe staged by Seneca’s tragedies mirrors the decadence and corruption of Imperial Rome. Even more interestingly, the political resonances of Seneca’s plays are elusively subtle: an outspoken attack on tyrannical power would have been too risky for the dramatist. As a result, Hesk concludes, “the

¹²² Schiesaro, p. 273.

¹²³ Schiesaro, p. 277.

¹²⁴ Graham Ley, “A Material World: Costumes, Properties, and Scenic Effects”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek and Roman Theatre*, pp. 268-85 (p. 283).

¹²⁵ Sander M. Goldberg, “The Fall and Rise of Roman Tragedy”, *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 126 (1996), pp. 265-86, quoted in Hesk, p. 88.

¹²⁶ Hesk, p. 88.

‘socio-politics’ of Senecan tragedy looks very different from that of its earlier Greek and Roman ancestors because too much ‘specificity’ could get an imperial playwright killed”.¹²⁷

2.4 Contemporary ‘Tragedy’ and Politics

In their essay on the civic dimension of tragedy, Boedeker and Raaflaub suggest that both Aristophanes and Aristotle seem to accept the traditional idea of the didactic role of the tragedian,¹²⁸ whereas Plato has a very different view. If, early in the *Republic*, Plato’s ‘mouthpiece’ Socrates accuses tragedy of fictionally imitating inferior people, or superior individuals privileging emotion over reason, by Book 10, he states that this mimetic art form should be forbidden even when it reproduces and enacts noble actions (“Dramatic poetry has a most formidable power of corrupting even men of high character, with a few exceptions”).¹²⁹ In another of his dialogues, *Gorgias*, Plato goes even further when Callicles states that tragedy “concentrates on pleasure and on gratifying spectators”:¹³⁰ in order “to compete successfully”,¹³¹ as Boedeker and Raaflaub put it, tragedians “must flatter their hearers rather than teach them”.¹³² Therefore, even if he recognises the power of tragedy, the Greek philosopher firmly

¹²⁷ Hesk, p. 89.

¹²⁸ Although, in his mordant comedy *Frogs*, “Aristophanes caricatures both Euripides and Aeschylus beyond recognition”, his vision is in keeping with the Greek idea of the (tragic) poet as “a teacher of the people”. Also the philosopher Aristotle “seems to have accepted the role of the poet-teacher, believing that tragedy could improve citizens by persuading them to live seriously, virtuously, and thoughtfully”. Boedeker and Raaflaub, pp. 109-10.

¹²⁹ *The Republic of Plato*, Trans. with Introduction and Notes by Francis MacDonald Cornford (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 337.

¹³⁰ Plato, *Gorgias*, Trans. with Notes by Terence Irwin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 79.

¹³¹ Boedeker and Raaflaub, p. 111.

¹³² Boedeker and Raaflaub, p. 111.

believes that, “rather than being truly educative”,¹³³ this art form should be defined as “harmful and meretricious”.¹³⁴ Remarkably, the fact that Plato’s dialogues highlight “the threat that performances of a theatrical sort pose to a well-ordered society”¹³⁵ suggests something of the destabilising potential of tragedy (and of theatre *tout court*). Starting from these premises, this final (sub)section aims to examine what remains of the political force of ancient tragedy in contemporary British society and Western culture more generally.

Simon Goldhill has rightly observed that “the ancient world provides a crucial framework for understanding the modern potential – and problems – of the political power of Greek tragedy”.¹³⁶ Even so, it would be dangerous to generalise and imply that the contemporary context merely mirrors its ancient counterpart. Moreover, as this chapter contends, the expression ‘the ancient context’ often includes and juxtaposes two different geo-cultural (and theatrical) dimensions, the Greek *polis* and the Roman world, with their own peculiarities, and this complicates things further. Consequently, the best approach seems that indicated by Carter: “just as ancient tragedy must be understood in its own cultural context, so must modern productions be understood in theirs”.¹³⁷

As far as ancient Greek tragedy and its reception are concerned, Carter argues that the essential difference between the politics of fifth-century tragedy and contemporary political theatre “has to do with the way in which drama engages with the state”.¹³⁸ In his opinion, even if eminent British playwrights who emerged in the Sixties and were once defined as radical – such as David Hare – have become more

¹³³ Boedeker and Raaflaub, p. 111.

¹³⁴ Boedeker and Raaflaub, p. 111.

¹³⁵ Kelleher, *Theatre & Politics*, p. 45.

¹³⁶ Goldhill, *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, p. 120.

¹³⁷ Carter, p. 146.

¹³⁸ Carter, p. 158.

mainstream, “it remains the case that, when one hears the phrase ‘political theatre’ in modern discourse, one is put in mind of political protest”.¹³⁹ As Carter makes clear, things worked differently in ancient Athens, where tragedy basically supported the *status quo* and, in turn, the establishment supported theatrical performances. In his words:

The political function of some modern plays is to provoke a radical response from the audience at least, to influence events at most, and in either case to set the drama against the political establishment. Fifth-century Athenian tragedy essentially *was* part of the establishment: the whole festival was publicly appointed and parts of it were publicly financed. In addition, for all the assumed heroic universe, tragic poets were wont to set their plays against the familiar landscape of the classical Greek *polis*; and they tended to treat cities and their citizens with a degree of respect.¹⁴⁰

It should also be noted that tragedy and comedy played different roles in Athenian culture. Indeed, while comic dramatists were allowed “to say things that were shameful or unspeakable at all other times, including ruthless satire against contemporary public figures”, the tragic genre “was less well placed to offer criticism of individual politicians or policies”.¹⁴¹ If Greek tragedians could not openly criticize the *polis* which financed the staging of their plays, it is not hard to see why – as previously pointed out – it was extremely dangerous for Seneca to denounce publicly the corruption of a dissolute tyrant such as Nero.

After this *excursus* on the socio-politics of Greek and Roman tragedy, it is worth focusing on the reasons why this ancient form, in particular Athenian tragedy, is still (politically) appealing and relevant today. As I have already remarked in the Introduction, for Edith Hall, the international renaissance of ancient Greek tragedy at the end of the Sixties coincides with a cultural revolution, and thus features patently

¹³⁹ Carter, p. 159.

¹⁴⁰ Carter, p. 159 [original emphasis].

¹⁴¹ Carter, p. 160.

socio-political motivations and implications. If it is certainly true that “Greek tragedy was itself born in a moment of political change”¹⁴² and “[t]he late twentieth-century has reawakened its political potential”,¹⁴³ it is even more important to seek to understand why this happened. In her Introduction to *Dionysus since 69*, Hall divides the possible motives into four interrelated categories, that is to say “social, political, theatrical, and cerebral”.¹⁴⁴ Though she affirms that this classification is not hierarchical, the first section of the volume, entitled “Dionysus and the Sex War”, emphasises her belief that “the most *obvious* reason for the recent renaissance of Greek tragedy in performance has been the rise and continuing impact of the feminist movement”.¹⁴⁵ For Hall, the famous slogan ‘The personal is political’

in a slightly different sense, could equally well serve as a description of Greek tragedy, where individual, private, intimate, domestic stories of sex, parenthood, and power struggles within the family, are told from the collective, communal, political perspective of the society within which the tragic family resides. In Greek tragedy the dialectical relationship between an individual’s personal conduct and her or his public conduct is a central dynamic.¹⁴⁶

Therefore, Hall believes that the impact and relevance of Greek tragedy today can be explained by the fact that “its personal stories are political”.¹⁴⁷

Simple as it is, the interpretation offered by this distinguished classicist may seem inadequate. In point of fact, in her thought-provoking study *Reaching Athens: Community, Democracy and Other Mythologies in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy* (2013), the theatre scholar Margherita Laera affirms that Hall’s argument “remains on

¹⁴² Edith Hall, “Introduction”, in *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, ed. by Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh, and Amanda Wrigley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 1-46 (p. 18).

¹⁴³ Hall, p. 18.

¹⁴⁴ Hall, p. 9.

¹⁴⁵ Hall, p. 9. [original emphasis].

¹⁴⁶ Hall, p. 10.

¹⁴⁷ Hall, p. 10.

the surface”.¹⁴⁸ In Laera’s opinion, Hall simply states that Athenian tragedy provides a model to investigate a range of topics

which were important areas of public debate in the late twentieth century, including homosexuality, parenthood, masculinity, child abuse, imperialism, adoption, immigration, exile, asylum, kidnapping, and even the Holocaust, claiming that Greek tragedies offered a way to explore them all.¹⁴⁹

For Laera, instead, the reasons for the contemporary Western appropriation of Greek tragedy “are to be found in the current ideological system, liberal capitalism, and its allegiance with democracy”.¹⁵⁰ In her opinion, in times of crisis, Europeans need to go back to the reassuring narratives offered by Greek tragedy – a communal art form traditionally associated with Athenian democracy – because of their troubles with (trans)national identity. As she observes, the myth of the ‘classical’ promoted by ancient tragedies indeed provides us with a comforting medium “to achieve self-definition”¹⁵¹ and self-affirmation on a global scale (and stage). More specifically,

[t]he idea that the Athenians ‘invented’ the theatre alongside democracy, that they also ‘discovered’ philosophy and the polis, that these texts were the ‘first’ dramatic scripts in the history of the West, and that the occasion for their first performance was an inherently ‘democratic’, communal and participatory ritual, providing Athenian citizens with a sense of belonging and political engagement, constitute the most important factors contributing to Greek tragedy’s popularity on contemporary European stages. This mythology reaffirmed late twentieth-century Western values in the polarized world of the Cold War, and continues to do so in the so-called age of uncertainty.¹⁵²

In my opinion, both interpretations are valuable. Although it is true that her argument seems more simplistic than Laera’s, Hall’s explanation is far from being less valid, especially if we consider one of the most distinctive features of contemporary British theatre, that is its special relationship with the society in which it is produced.

¹⁴⁸ Margherita Laera, *Reaching Athens: Community, Democracy and Other Mythologies in Adaptations of Greek Tragedy* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 43.

¹⁴⁹ Laera, *Reaching Athens*, p. 43.

¹⁵⁰ Laera, *Reaching Athens*, p. 43.

¹⁵¹ Laera, *Reaching Athens*, p. 43.

¹⁵² Laera, *Reaching Athens*, p. 43.

As I have made clear in the Introduction, postwar British theatre mirrors cultural, political, and societal transformations in a unique way. In addition, the fruitful dialogue between micro and macrocosm pervades the vast majority of British plays, in particular those texts written and staged in the past two decades. In the early twenty-first century, British theatre has oscillated between the personal and the public, the local and the global: a whole wave of plays dealing with the disintegration of the traditional family in today's Britain is juxtaposed with a number of texts tackling global-scale issues such as the economic and financial crisis, terrorism, and the environment, and often both dimensions coexist in the same piece. Therefore, it might be argued that contemporary British theatre combines, stages, and examines different nuances of 'the political'. As Stella Duffy states in a reflection piece about 'Noughties' theatre, "politics is as big as global warming and as small as how we treat our lovers".¹⁵³ If British plays can be political in different ways, the same happens with ancient tragedies and their rewritings. As the three case studies in this dissertation will demonstrate, contemporary British appropriations of Graeco-Roman tragic hypotexts fruitfully move between domestic and (inter)national politics, gender and public wars, local and global settings, specific and universal references. I agree with Hall when she stresses that Greek (and Roman) tragedies offer dramatic templates to stage personal stories and their inherently political resonances, but it should also be remembered that we are not merely dealing with drawing-room plays or what may be defined as 'family drama'. The domestic component of ancient tragedies should not be trivialised and oversimplified: these plays are deeply embedded in their civic dimension (or imperial context, in Seneca's case) and usually represent characters such as kings, queens, heroes, and gods.

¹⁵³ Quoted in Michael Billington, "All Our Yesterdays", (available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/aug/03/theatre.politicaltheatre>, last accessed 04 July 2015).

Laera's perspective is just as intriguing. Her study aims to investigate "the mythologies surrounding 'classical' Athens, as articulated and disseminated through theatre and performance"¹⁵⁴ and to show how these received discourses "might illuminate how 'we', the people of Europe, imagine ourselves and negotiate our place in the world".¹⁵⁵ While Hall's approach is seemingly more conventional and – even if it does not adopt a specifically national perspective – can be easily applied to today's British theatre, Laera's alternative interpretation throws light on issues such as globalisation and Western identity which are particularly relevant to (the myth of) contemporary democratic Europe. This wider perspective does not mean that Laera's study may not be of use to scholars interested in the (notoriously insular) British context. Rather, it offers an effective theoretical tool to examine those British plays which explore more global concerns and raise some urgent questions about the idea of identity and community in late-capitalist Western societies.

Thus, in this thesis, my analysis of three significant rewritings of Graeco-Roman tragedies (Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996), Tony Harrison's *Prometheus* (1998), and Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* (2004)) will draw upon both explanations for the classical reawakening described above. In particular, developing the premises sketched out in this chapter, my close reading of these English-language appropriations will explore how some talented British dramatists have subverted the conventions of ancient tragedy to rewrite the notions of personal and communal identity, and staged (or screened) exemplary intersections of politics, ethics, and affect.

¹⁵⁴ Laera, *Reaching Athens*, p. 1.

¹⁵⁵ Laera, *Reaching Athens*, p. 1.

CASE STUDIES:

1. DISMEMBERING SENECA:

SARAH KANE'S *PHAEDRA'S LOVE* (1996)

In a brief lifespan, Sarah Kane (1971-1999) wrote five controversial plays (*Blasted*, *Phaedra's Love*, *Cleansed*, *Crave*, *4.48 Psychosis*) and a short film (*Skin*), for which she was dubbed “the most famous and infamous playwright of the 1990s”¹ and deemed to have “altered the landscape of British theatre”.² The list of graphic atrocities and the experimental structure of her debut play *Blasted*, first performed at London’s Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 12 January 1995, left critics and audiences shocked. It is little wonder that Kane’s suicide at the early age of 28 has contributed to lionise this talented young writer and to canonise her complex and oblique body of work. Even if it is extremely tempting to consider her output “as a summation of her life”,³ in his lucid introduction to Kane’s *Complete Plays* (2001), her fellow Scottish playwright and friend David Greig warns us about the futility and dangers of an autobiographical interpretation of her dramatic *corpus*: “To read these plays for what they tell us about their author is, to my mind, a pointlessly forensic act. The work’s true completion comes when the plays are read for what they tell us about ourselves”.⁴ On the contrary, for Edward Bond, who defended *Blasted* when it was savagely attacked by critics in the

¹ Catherine Rees, “Sarah Kane”, in *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s*, ed. by Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), pp. 112-37 (p. 112).

² Ken Urban, “An Ethics of Catastrophe: The Theatre of Sarah Kane”, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 23 (2001), pp. 36-46 (p. 36).

³ Rees, p. 112.

⁴ David Greig, “Introduction”, in Sarah Kane, *Complete Plays: Blasted, Phaedra's Love, Cleansed, Crave, 4.48 Psychosis, Skin* (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), pp. ix-xviii (p. xviii).

mid-Nineties, “[t]here is no barrier between life and drama. They are one reality, a cause in one is an effect in the other. Saying otherwise is Philistine aestheticism. Sarah Kane’s last play was as total as her first”.⁵ While, on the one hand, I think that it is essential not to sensationalise and idealise her tragic death, on the other hand, we cannot help considering the intimate connection between Kane’s tangled life and her controversial career. Bearing this in mind, this chapter will focus on Kane’s radical appropriation of the Phaedra myth, loosely based on Seneca’s version as well as on other sources. The first part of my analysis aims to examine the genesis of *Phaedra’s Love* and the palimpsestic nature of Kane’s contemporary rewriting, which juxtaposes classical hypotexts with modern Continental referents. After exploring the dismemberment of Seneca’s tragedy and Kane’s personal ‘re-memberment’ of the textual body, I will consider the question of generic crosspollination in a rewriting which is interspersed with black humour and characterised by the ostension of the body. Especially in the final scene, by staging physical dismemberment, Kane’s play indeed inverts, subverts, and intermingles generic categories such as the tragic, the comic, and the grotesque. Oscillating between personal and more broadly sociopolitical issues, her ‘in-yer-face’ Phaedra, which belongs to the wave of graphic Nineties plays, effectively stages the ongoing intersection between an equally dysfunctional micro- and macrocosm.

⁵ Edward Bond, “Epilogue: The Mark of Kane”, in *Sarah Kane in Context*, ed. by Laurens De Vos and Graham Saunders (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), pp. 209-20 (pp. 218-9).

1. TEXTUAL BODY AND HYBRIDIZATION

1.1 “I’ve Always Hated Those Plays”: Kane and Ancient Tragedy

After the scandal caused by the Royal Court’s production of *Blasted*, defined by the *Times* critic Kate Bassett as “the biggest theatrical stir since [Howard Brenton’s] *The Romans in Britain*”,⁶ reviewers and theatregoers “were agog to see what Kane’s next full-length play would look like”.⁷ They did not have to wait long: *Phaedra’s Love*, a short play divided into eight brief scenes and directed by the dramatist herself, was first performed at London’s Gate Theatre on 15 May 1996, exactly sixteen months after Kane’s (in)famous first play. As this section will show, the genesis of this rewriting of the ancient tale of Phaedra and her stepson Hippolytus is extremely relevant to the texture of the play. Notably, the fact that Kane “chose her subject somewhat arbitrarily and [...] with little sense of an ideological burden”⁸ opened up a range of intertextual possibilities. Everything started with a commission from the Gate, a small but lively theatre based in Notting Hill, planning a new season of adaptations of “[t]he most beautiful and profound ancient European myths and stories” by “[t]he most exciting and celebrated young British writers”,⁹ entitled *New Playwrights, Ancient Sources*.¹⁰ Kane’s agent, Mel Kenyon, recalls what happened:

⁶ Kate Bassett, *The Times*, 22 May 1996; *Theatre Record*, vol. XVI, no. 11 (1996), p. 651.

⁷ Frances Babbage, *Re-Visioning Myth: Modern and Contemporary Drama by Women* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 197.

⁸ Babbage, pp. 197-8.

⁹ I have consulted the season’s programme at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, based in the Classics Centre at the University of Oxford.

¹⁰ The *New Playwrights, Ancient Sources* season also included Paul Godfrey’s *The Invisible Woman*, a contemporary rewriting of a comedy by Terence, and Nick Ward’s *The Decameron*, an adaptation of Boccaccio’s tales.

If I can remember correctly, the Gate rang us and asked Sarah if she'd like to do an adaptation of a classical drama. I encouraged her to do it because after *Blasted* she was very exhausted and upset. Second plays are notoriously difficult to write anyway. So I thought it would be a good experience – she'd flex different writing muscles. I also saw it as a way of keeping her going as a writer – and I don't just mean financially.¹¹

Kane's first choice was Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck*, but, as she declared in a 1998 interview, the Gate was "actually planning to do a season of all of Büchner's plays, so *Woyzeck* was out".¹² Being deeply interested in that nineteenth-century play, Kane suggested Bertolt Brecht's *Baal*, a text that was freely based on *Woyzeck*. Again, they rejected Kane's idea owing to "all the possible problems with the Brecht estate".¹³ At that point, the Gate itself encouraged Kane to rewrite a Greek or Roman text. It is important to stress that the *enfant terrible* of contemporary British theatre was not particularly enthusiastic about adapting an ancient tragedy. Believing in the ethical value of the visual and in the truthfulness of the visceral, Kane instinctively detested the lack of immediacy of that kind of theatre: "I've always hated those plays. Everything happens off-stage, and what's the point?".¹⁴ In spite of her initial reluctance, she opted for a Senecan play because she had really appreciated Caryl Churchill's translation of *Thyestes*: "I read Phaedra, and surprisingly enough it interested me".¹⁵ As she stated, that was the only time she examined her main source: "I only read Seneca once. I didn't want to get too much into it – I certainly didn't want to write a play that you couldn't understand unless you knew the original. I wanted it to stand completely on its own".¹⁶

¹¹ Quoted in Graham Saunders, *'Love Me or Kill Me': Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 149.

¹² Quoted in Graham Saunders, *Kane on Kane: The Playwright & the Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 67.

¹³ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 67.

¹⁴ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 67.

¹⁵ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 67.

¹⁶ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 67.

Kane's words are particularly revealing about the nature of her practices of rewriting. Believing that her "only responsibility [was] towards the truth",¹⁷ Kane rewrote the myth of Phaedra in order to explore the limits of theatrical performability and visibility by showing her audience what (she thought) ancient tragedians were reluctant to stage. Though Dominic Dromgoole has claimed that Kane's "knowledge of theatre history, ancient and modern" was "comprehensive",¹⁸ some of the young writer's "misconceptions"¹⁹ about ancient Greek and Roman tragedy, as Margherita Laera suggests, may be "key to the understanding of *Phaedra's Love*".²⁰ In her demythologising and thought-provoking study, Laera examines what she calls "the false etymology"²¹ of the word 'obscene', that is to say the shared but erroneous assumption that this term refers to what is "kept offstage (from the Latin *ob*, 'off', and *scaena*, 'stage') for its 'indecent' content".²² Even though I am not going to focus on philological questions, I think that Laera's argument offers an insightful and daring reading of Kane's 'spontaneous' appropriation of a classical myth. Although I do not want to diminish a talented writer's stature and work, I believe that Kane's affective – and inevitably personal – response and approach to her classical sources, especially Seneca, was mainly instinctive. For instance, the British playwright does not differentiate between Greek and Roman theatre practices, oversimplifying and universalising the notion of 'the classical'. Even if it is true that Athenian tragedies tend to avoid onstage death, it is equally inaccurate to argue that Senecan drama – staged or

¹⁷ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 96.

¹⁸ Dominic Dromgoole, *The Full Room: An A-Z of Contemporary Playwriting* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 162.

¹⁹ Margherita Laera, *Reaching Athens: Community, Democracy and Other Mythologies in Adaptations of Greek Tragedies* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 171.

²⁰ Laera, p. 171.

²¹ Laera, p. 133.

²² Laera, p. 133.

not staged – spurns violence. Rather, as the classicist Roland Mayer points out in his study of *Phaedra*,

[d]eath on stage may in fact have been commoner than our extant Greek scripts suggest, and it may have become a more acceptable practice in later drama. At any rate, Senecan characters kill or commit suicide quite often on stage, and we should probably regard this as evidence for a certain grossness of sensibility in the Roman audience (even one at recitation), a grossness encouraged by what they encountered in the amphitheatre. Death as spectacle was a Roman pastime, and even though Seneca himself deplored it in an eloquent letter (number 7 in the *Letters to Lucilius*), he was to some extent infected by the taste.²³

Similarly, in his essay “Grotesque Vision: Seneca’s Tragedies and Neronian Art”, the art historian and classicist Eric R. Varner distinguishes between the dark dramatic landscapes of Seneca and those of the Greek tragedians, stressing the importance of the performative quality of the Roman playwright’s language and his penchant for the grotesque and the macabre:

Seneca’s tragedies are remarkable for their vivid, atmospheric descriptions of macabre and grotesque events. The strikingly visual character of his language, especially apparent in the depiction of gruesome occurrences, clearly separates Seneca as a tragedian from his fifth-century Greek predecessors, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.²⁴

This is well exemplified by the fact that, in one of his most emblematic tragedies, *Phaedra*, Seneca challenges the notion of theatrical decency precisely by “featur[ing] macabre descriptions and graphic onstage images, combining mimetic representation and sensational messenger accounts”.²⁵ As we shall see in due course, in the sixth and final act of his tragedy the Roman writer stages *Phaedra*’s suicide, while – unexpectedly – Kane keeps this graphic action offstage, thus dismembering the texture of the classical hypotext. And even if, in the fifth act of *Phaedra*, Hippolytus’s violent death is merely reported by a messenger, his dismembered body is subsequently exposed to the

²³ Roland Mayer, *Seneca: Phaedra* (London: Duckworth, 2002), pp. 31-32.

²⁴ Eric R. Varner, “Grotesque Vision: Seneca’s Tragedies and Neronian Art”, in *Seneca in Performance*, ed. by George W. M. Harrison (London: Duckworth, 2000), pp. 119-36 (p. 119).

²⁵ Laera, p. 156.

audience. In addition, the final act features Theseus painfully ‘re-membering’ the remains of his son’s body for the funeral.

Before starting my analysis of Kane’s rewriting of Seneca’s tragedy, it might be useful to summarise the Phaedra myth. As the Senecan specialist Anthony J. Boyle writes in the Introduction to his translation of and commentary on the Roman (hypo)text, “[t]he story of a married woman who falls in love with a young man, finds her advances rejected and pre-empted denunciation by accusing him to her husband is a common folk-tale theme”.²⁶ This mythic narrative has been rewritten in various forms, but the most popular version is the story of Phaedra and Hippolytus, a legend probably originating in Troezen, a coastal town in the northeastern Peloponnese in which Poseidon and Hippolytus were worshipped.²⁷

It should be noted that Seneca’s version represents the fifth re-interpretation of Phaedra’s incestuous passion for Hippolytus, a myth previously rewritten once by Sophocles, twice by Euripides, once by Lycophron and by Ovid.²⁸ Even more interestingly, the Phaedra tale seems to be still very relevant today. Indeed, as far as contemporary British theatre is concerned, we can identify various re-enactments which, to a lesser or larger extent, re-vision the original sources. Graham Saunders has usefully listed some of the most important English-language re-figurations of this mythic narrative:

Examples include Tony Harrison’s *Phaedra Britannica* (1975) which sets the play in the context of the British Raj; Brian Friel’s *Living Quarters* (1977) locates the play to Ireland and is sub-titled ‘After Hippolytus’; Timberlake

²⁶ Anthony J. Boyle, *Seneca’s Phaedra: Introduction, Text, Translation and Notes* (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1987; repr. Leeds 1992), p. 15.

²⁷ “Its main elements are clear: the married woman, Phaedra, is the young man’s, Hippolytus’, stepmother; he rejects her advances (or another’s on her behalf); Phaedra accuses him to her husband; the husband curses Hippolytus and invokes Poseidon’s (Neptune’s) aid; Hippolytus is killed, while driving his chariot, by a monstrous bull from the sea; Phaedra kills herself”. Boyle, p. 15.

²⁸ See Hanna M. Roisman, “A New Look at Seneca’s *Phaedra*”, in *Seneca in Performance*, ed. by George W. M. Harrison (London: Duckworth, 2000), pp. 73-86 (p. 73).

Wertebaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988) uses the Hippolytus myth more as a secondary source to another Greek myth – that of Philomele, Procne and Tereus. The same territory is also explored in Joanna Laurens's play *The Three Birds* (2000).²⁹

In *Phaedra's Love*, Kane dislocates this myth from its original context and relocates it to Nineties Britain. In order to understand to what extent she rewrites the conventions of ancient tragedy, in particular Seneca's dramatic architecture, it is interesting to explore her characterisation of the female and male protagonists, as well as their complex interaction. A good starting point for this analysis is the title of the play. As some commentators have pointed out, it potentially generates ambiguities: indeed, *Phaedra's Love* can indicate both love in an abstract sense and, more concretely, Phaedra's object of desire, that is Hippolytus.³⁰ Despite this polysemy, her German literary agent and translator Nils Tabert affirms,³¹ Kane wanted to refer exclusively to Phaedra's stepson:

Sarah was worried at one stage about the German title of *Phaedra's Love* which for her means Hippolytus. It's more the object of Phaedra's love which she wanted to underline rather than the emotion itself. In Germany the play is called *Phaidra's [sic] Liebe* which, when you first hear it, is more about the emotion of love. But then I think it's the same in English when hearing *Phaedra's Love*.³²

Tabert's words confirm that, although Phaedra plays a crucial role in this contemporary appropriation, Kane aimed to focus primarily on the character of Hippolytus. As she declared in an interview with David Benedict, she did not find Seneca's depiction of the main male figure very appealing. Thus, she decided to dismember Seneca's

²⁹ Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 149.

³⁰ See Maurizia Matteuzzi, "*Phaedra's Love* di Sarah Kane (1996): una cruda riscrittura tra Euripide e Seneca", in *Fedras de ayer y de hoy. Teatro, poesía, narrativa y cine ante un mito clásico*, ed. by Andrés Pociña and Aurora López (Granada: Editorial Universidad de Granada, 2008), pp. 613-7 (p. 615) and Anja Müller-Wood, "The Fatal Effects of Phaedra's Love: Sarah Kane", in *Myth and Violence in the Contemporary Female Text: New Cassandra's*, ed. by Sanja Bahun-Radunović and V. G. Julie Rajan (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 97-112 (p. 103).

³¹ Tabert collaborated on the German translations of Kane's *Cleansed* and *Crave*.

³² Quoted in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 140.

characterisation of his virginal Hippolytus and re-membered this figure according to her taste:

This supposedly beautiful young boy [...] is, to my mind, totally unattractive and other than the influence of the gods I couldn't see why Phaedra would fall in love with him. I wanted that same drive towards destruction at the end but I didn't want the passion imposed by the external force of the gods. I wanted to give it to the characters, to make it a human tragedy, so I turned him into something quite different.³³

In *Phaedra's Love*, Seneca's Hippolytus becomes a repulsive and apathetic prince, who "[f]ill[s] up time"³⁴ by watching Hollywood films "*impassively*",³⁵ eating junk food (e.g. hamburgers, peanut butter, and sweets), masturbating into a sock "*without a flicker of pleasure*"³⁶ and having occasional sex with women and men. This misanthropic character seems to be totally unable to feel emotions. Despite all of this, or maybe precisely because he is in pain, Phaedra adores her stepson. Since she "[c]an't deny something this big",³⁷ in the middle of the play she confesses her feelings for him:

PHAEDRA: I love you.

Silence.

HIPPOLYTUS: Why?

PHAEDRA: You're difficult. Moody, cynical, bitter, fat, decadent, spoilt. You stay in bed all day then watch TV all night, you crash around this house with sleep in your eyes and not a thought for anyone. You're in pain. I adore you.

HIPPOLYTUS: Not very logical.

PHAEDRA: Love isn't.³⁸

The queen's words vividly illuminate her unhealthy relationship with the cynical prince: while Phaedra loves everything about her stepson, even what most of us would find

³³ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 69.

³⁴ Sarah Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, in her *Complete Plays: Blasted, Phaedra's Love, Cleansed, Crave, 4.48 Psychosis, Skin* (London: Methuen Drama, 2001), pp. 63-103 (p. 79).

³⁵ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 65.

³⁶ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 65.

³⁷ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 71.

³⁸ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, pp. 78-79.

reprehensible and repugnant, Hippolytus sharply discourages her. In fact, the (seeming) brutality of Hippolytus's reply shows his relentless sincerity.

The dominance of this disarmingly frank character in the play, sustained by Phaedra's obsession with him, contrasts with the dramatic architecture of Seneca's version, in which the tragic heroine takes centre stage until the end. In keeping with Seneca, later appropriations of the myth such as Jean Racine's *Phèdre* (1677) and Tony Harrison's *Phaedra Britannica* (1975) have tended to focus on the female character, as their titles make clear. Kane instead reverses this trend by concentrating on the prince.³⁹ Hippolytus's dominant role demonstrates that it is extremely difficult to separate Kane's personal life from her writing career. Indeed, when she was working on *Phaedra's Love*, the young dramatist was severely depressed, and her interest in the character of Hippolytus was generated by her troubled state of mind. At the same time, however, she felt real empathy for Phaedra's unrequited love:

I suppose I did set out to write a play about depression because of my state of being at that time. And so inevitably it did become more about Hippolytus – except that it was also about that split in my own personality: of the fact that I'm simultaneously Hippolytus and Phaedra, and both those things are completely possible – that lethal cynicism coupled with obsessional love for someone who is completely unlovable.⁴⁰

In the end, writing the play and feeling immersed in the opposite conditions of Hippolytus and Phaedra had a therapeutic effect on the young dramatist:

So everytime I wrote a scene I was writing myself into rather opposite states, and what it's like when these two people come together. The act of writing the play was to try to connect two extremes in my own head – which in the end wasn't only a depressing experience, but also very liberating.⁴¹

³⁹ See Babbage, p. 198.

⁴⁰ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 71.

⁴¹ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 71.

Kane's interest lies in what Babbage terms "the dynamic between them, whereby obsessive love meets a blank wall of cynicism".⁴² In trying to connect these two dramatic and psychological extremes, Kane shows us that it is possible to identify a common trait in these two seemingly conflicting personalities. For, in different ways, both Hippolytus and Phaedra are totally open and honest about what they think, feel, and need. In this light, if we reconsider the scene of Phaedra's declaration of love, as the classicist Erica Bexley suggests, the young prince "fails to understand Phaedra at a fundamental level: what seems like rhetoric to him is perfectly real to her; she is just as honest about her feelings as he is".⁴³

The relentless pursuit of honesty will lead both Phaedra and Hippolytus to their tragic deaths. In this section, I will principally focus on the female heroine's suicide, whereas Hippolytus's grotesque dismemberment and spectacular death will be examined later in the chapter. As I have already mentioned, while the heroine stabs herself in the presence of the audience in the final act of Seneca's *Phaedra*, her twentieth-century (more uninhibited) counterpart hangs herself behind the scenes just after confessing her passion to the prince and performing oral sex on him as a birthday present. In Scene Four, Hippolytus, who "*comes in her mouth without taking his eyes off the television*",⁴⁴ upsets Phaedra by admitting that he has previously had sex with his stepsister, her "less passionate but more practised"⁴⁵ daughter Strophe (who has also had a secret affair with her stepfather Theseus), and coldly suggesting the queen she should see a doctor because of his gonorrhoea. Even if Kane declared "I read Euripides

⁴² Babbage, p. 199.

⁴³ Erica Bexley, "Show or Tell? Seneca's and Sarah Kane's *Phaedra* Plays", *Trends in Classics*, 3 (2011), pp. 365-93 (p. 371).

⁴⁴ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 81.

⁴⁵ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 84.

after I'd written *Phaedra's Love*. And I've never read Racine so far",⁴⁶ Phaedra's subsequent suicide, accompanied by a note accusing Hippolytus of rape, has clear Euripidean resonances.⁴⁷ Also, the offstage death of the contemporary queen is quite unusual for a dramatist rooted in the visual and, at the same time, the heroine's suicide is far from being grandiose and spectacular.⁴⁸ Moreover, if we consider that Kane's Phaedra kills herself towards the middle of the play, her character may seem less fully developed than the protagonist, who dies on stage in the very last scene. Yet, Kane herself points out that her Phaedra is not a passive and vague character, but "the first person to become active in the play – her accusation and suicide liberates Hippolytus and sets off the most extraordinary chain of events leading to the collapse of the monarchy".⁴⁹ Phaedra's offstage suicide thus constitutes a turning point in the play: after being accused of rape, the apathetic prince realises that his stepmother's feelings were true ("She really did love me"⁵⁰). Moreover, for the first time Hippolytus seems to feel grateful ("Bless her."⁵¹) to the woman who, as Laurens De Vos has rightly observed, bravely

sacrifices herself to tear her stepson out of his lethargic state of nonexistence. [...] Unlike the useless presents he had received from the people on the occasion of his birthday, his stepmother's sacrifice isn't tat or bric-a-brac; it is proof of

⁴⁶ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 67.

⁴⁷ See Euripides, *Hippolytus*, with Introduction, Translation and Commentary by Michael R. Halleran (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1995), pp. 107-11. In this regard, the German anglicist Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier observes: "Strangely enough, Kane does not let this suicide take place on stage. The manner of Phaedra's death is changed back to the way it was in Euripides' play, the heroine of the play deprived of her heroic death". Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier, "Rewriting Seneca: Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love*", in *Crossing Borders – Intercultural Drama and Theatre at the Turn of the Millennium*, (Contemporary Drama in English 8), ed. by Bernhard Reitz and Alyce von Rothkirch, (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001), pp. 165-72 (p. 170).

⁴⁸ Kane believed that theatre-goers deserved to see everything, even violent deaths: "I mean, if you're not going to see what happens, why pay pounds 10 [*sic*] to not see it?". Quoted in Brusberg-Kiermeier, p. 169.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 72.

⁵⁰ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 91.

⁵¹ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 91.

her unconditional and undying love for him that she is willing to pay for with her life.⁵²

Kane's (re)depiction of Hippolytus and Phaedra is probably the most profound change that Seneca's hypotext has undergone, but other elements of structural and ideological re-vision of it should be considered. As the *dramatis personae* list shows us, Hippolytus, Phaedra, and her husband Theseus are the only classical figures that the young playwright relocates to twentieth-century Britain, whereas Seneca's *nutrix* (nurse), chorus, and *nuntius* (messenger) are omitted or, at least, transformed into someone else (e.g. the contemporary character named Strophe). Moreover, Kane adds a series of supporting characters such as the royal doctor, a priest, two policemen, and an angry crowd.⁵³

It is worth concentrating on the character of Phaedra's daughter, Strophe, introduced to replace the queen's confidante and the chorus. The most amiable and generous character in the play, Strophe is a young woman who deeply loves her mother and cares for her stepbrother Hippolytus and her stepfather Theseus, even if the bond that links them is not one of blood. Despite her kindness and noble feelings, like the other main characters, Strophe is entrapped in the dysfunctional dynamics of this royal family:

STROPHE: I'll die for this family.

HIPPOLYTUS: Yes. You probably will.

I told her about us.

⁵² Laurens De Vos, *Cruelty and Desire in the Modern Theater: Antonin Artaud, Sarah Kane, and Samuel Beckett* (Madison and Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2011), p. 94.

⁵³ Brusberg-Kiermeier suggests that Kane includes these minor *dramatis personae* to adapt the mythic narrative to a twentieth-century context, and summarises the role they play in *Phaedra's Love*, pointing out some of their ideological implications: "A priest represents the clergy and changes the field of discussion of morality. Two policemen stand for (corrupt) law and order: their behaviour serves to illustrate that even official representatives rather join in the cruel mob than fulfil their duty. The angry mob that takes revenge on the putative rapist is embodied by two women, two men and some children. The doctor who talks to Phaedra about Hippolytus partly takes over the role of Phaedra's nurse". Brusberg-Kiermeier, p. 168.

STROPHE: You what?

HIPPOLYTUS: Yes. And I mentioned that you'd had her husband.

STROPHE: No.

HIPPOLYTUS: I didn't say you fucked him on their wedding night, but since he
left the day after –

STROPHE: Mother.⁵⁴

Although her sexual conduct is obviously not irreproachable, Strophe remains a likeable and sympathetic figure, probably because readers/spectators tend to consider this young woman a victim of the sexual appetites of her promiscuous stepbrother (“Not my sister after all. One of my victims”⁵⁵) and of the rage of Theseus, who – in the last scene of the play – inadvertently rapes and kills his stepdaughter before cutting his own throat:

THESEUS: I'm sorry.

Didn't know it was you.

God forgive me I didn't know.

If I'd known it was you I'd never have –⁵⁶

It is important to note that, besides serving a pragmatic function, the character of Strophe has meta-dramatic and meta-theatrical resonances, emphasised by her evocative name. As Pankratz suggests in her article on contemporary appropriations of myths in British and Irish drama, Phaedra's young daughter plays the part of the 'strophe' of Greek tragedy (that is the first part of a choral ode) “acting as a dialogue partner to Phaedra and Hippolytus. Strophe's rape and murder by Theseus then might allude to tradition's appropriation of myths, to Kane's rewriting and to reactions to Kane's rewritings”.⁵⁷ With these classical and meta-theatrical echoes, the figure of Strophe triggered Edith Hall's critical reaction. In her review of the play, which appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 7 June 1996, the classicist could not help commenting on

⁵⁴ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 88.

⁵⁵ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 102.

⁵⁷ Anette Pankratz, “Greek to Us? Appropriations of Myths in Contemporary British and Irish Drama”, in *Crossing Borders – Intercultural Drama and Theatre at the Turn of the Millennium* (Contemporary Drama in English 8), ed. by Bernhard Reitz and Alyce von Rothkirch (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001), pp. 151-163 (p. 159).

what she considered a clumsy mis-appropriation of Greek tragedy, stressing the inaccuracy of Kane's choice of the young character's name and criticising her radical rewriting at large:

The Greek word 'strophe' originally meant a 'turn', and came to be used as the technical term for the first in a matching pair of musical stanzas in a dramatic chorus. But there is no reason for Kane's choice of Strophe's name. The play uses neither music nor chorus, and Strophe's character does no 'turning', since she is drawn with marginally less flagrant inconsistency than the others in the play. The gesture her name makes towards the drama's classical ancestry is indicative of the entire work; it is an attempt to disguise what is essentially inconsequential with a thin layer of allusive obscurantism.⁵⁸

Even if Hall's argument might be convincing from a classical/philological perspective, Kane's instinctive and unorthodox approach to Graeco-Roman referents, correctly defined by Babbage as "both highly partial and undeniably irreverent",⁵⁹ should not be discarded as uninteresting or unproductive. Rather, Kane's vivid theatrical imagination re-visits the ancient source in a highly creative and personal way, which illuminates both the classical hypertext and the contemporary hypertext and, at the same time, their fractured but fertile dialogue.

On the one hand, it is of course true that this appropriation radically re-interprets (and sometimes even mis-interprets) the Roman tragedy. Bexley rightly observes that, for this reason, *Phaedra's Love* cannot be appealing to those reception scholars who are mainly interested in classical philology: "Since there is little textual correspondence between Seneca's version and Kane's, classicists working on reception cannot, in this instance, employ their usual techniques for *quellenforschung* [study of sources]".⁶⁰ In this regard, it is interesting to note that the most evident Senecan resonance appears in Scene Four of Kane's play, just before Phaedra confesses to Hippolytus that she loves

⁵⁸ Edith Hall, "A Real Turn-Off, Strophe", *TLS*, 7 June 1996, p. 20.

⁵⁹ Babbage, p. 200.

⁶⁰ Bexley, p. 390.

him. The heroine is increasingly nervous and instinctively reacts when the prince calls her ‘Mother’:

HIPPOLYTUS: Come on, *Mother*, work it out.

PHAEDRA: Don’t call me that.

[...]

HIPPOLYTUS: Why shouldn’t I call you mother, *Mother*? I thought that’s what was required.⁶¹

If we compare this passage with its counterpart in the third act of Seneca’s *Phaedra*, the textual similarities are striking:

HIPPOLYTUS: Committe curas auribus, *mater*, meis.

PHAEDRA: *Matris* superbum est nomen et nimium potens;
nostros humilius nomen affectus decet.
me uel sororem, Hippolyte, uel famulam uoca,
famulamque potius; omne seruitium feram.

HIPPOLYTUS: Commit your troubles to my ears, *mother*.

PHAEDRA: *Mother* is a proud name and much too great;
A humbler name better fits our feelings.
Call me sister, Hippolytus, or servant,
Better servant; I’ll bear all servitude.⁶²

In this specific passage Seneca’s Phaedra is even more outspoken than Kane’s, who “[d]oesn’t respond”⁶³ to Hippolytus’s question: in Latin the two designations proposed by the queen (sister and servant) “can have erotic overtones, especially the latter which suggests the ‘servitude of love’ motif, common in erotic poetry”.⁶⁴ In addition to the overall scarcity of textual congruences, as Bexley points out, those few “Senecan elements surfacing in *Phaedra’s Love* are mediated not only by translation, but also by a performance tradition rooted in twentieth-century theory”,⁶⁵ and this complicates things further.

⁶¹ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 78 [my emphasis].

⁶² Boyle, pp. 80-81 [my emphasis].

⁶³ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 78.

⁶⁴ Mayer, p. 27.

⁶⁵ Bexley, p. 390.

However, on the other hand, Kane's disrespectfully contemporary rewriting demonstrates that it is possible to dismember an ancient text maintaining, at the same time, some of its essence. Indeed, in unique ways, the young British dramatist and the Roman tragedian "display similar aesthetic and dramatic qualities in their work",⁶⁶ such as an interest in the corruption of human nature; the representation of physical, sexual, and emotional violence; the penchant for the grotesque, the macabre, and the paradoxical facets of the tragic; and the desire to explore and push the theatrical boundaries to the limit.

1.2 (Inter)Textual Cross-pollination: Brecht and Camus

Since this dissertation deals with contemporary British re-visions of Greek and Roman tragedies, the first – and largest – section has focused on the relationship between Kane and Seneca. However, it is important to recognise that *Phaedra's Love* also draws upon other textual sources, which were mentioned by Kane herself but have not been examined by scholars so far (the only exception being Saunders's first complete study of Kane's output, which briefly considers the European hypotexts of her rewriting).⁶⁷ This section thus aims to address this gap in scholarship in order to suggest other intertextual directions in Kane's dramatic world.

As far as her influences are concerned, Kane is undoubtedly an interesting and complex writer. Like her fellow playwright Martin Crimp, she is one of those theatre innovators who have been more appreciated in Continental Europe than in Britain. The most obvious reason behind this hostile reception in their own country is that both Kane

⁶⁶ Bexley, p. 390.

⁶⁷ See Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, pp. 72-74, 77, 81.

and Crimp have been profoundly influenced by Continental writers and theorists. As Kane herself declared in a 1998 interview with Nils Tabert:

[I] mainly [read] non-English stuff, except for Pinter, Barker and Bond. It's mainly European literature. I think with everything I write there are usually a couple of books that I read again and again when writing. With *Cleansed* it was *Woyzeck*, *Nineteen Eighty Four*, *Twelfth Night* and Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*. *Blasted* was *King Lear* and *Waiting for Godot*. It was strange with *Blasted* because for me there are three sections: the first one was very influenced by Ibsen; the second one by Brecht and the third one by Beckett. *Phaedra's Love* was Brecht's *Baal*, and Camus' *The Outsider*. *Crave* was *The Wasteland*. And the new one [4.48 *Psychosis*] it's Artaud.⁶⁸

I have quoted Kane's words at length to give a sense of the heterogeneity of her influences, ranging from literature to theatre, from English-language classics to Continental plays, novels, and theories. In this vein, besides Seneca's tragedy, the sources of *Phaedra's Love's* are twentieth-century European works: Bertolt Brecht's first full-length play, *Baal* (1918), and Albert Camus's first novel *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*) (1942).

Baal was the result of Brecht's hostile reaction to *Der Einsame* (*The Lonely One*) (1917), a play written by the Expressionist author Hanns Johst, staging the life of a late Romantic dramatist, Christian Dietrich Grabbe, as the stereotypical representation of a misunderstood genius. If *Der Einsame* was the trigger for Brecht's first play, many commentators have noted that *Baal* was, at the same time, a product of the historical period in which it was written, namely the end of the First World War. As Ronald Speirs points out:

the imprint of the war is apparent not only in the protagonist's intense appetite for life but also in an all-pervading sense of life's transience, a theme that runs through the whole of Brecht's Twenties work as an abiding mark of the existential shock administered by the war.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, pp. 38-39.

⁶⁹ Ronald Speirs, *Bertolt Brecht* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 17.

Although it was the dramatic debut of a twenty-year-old young man, reverberating with autobiographical echoes and imbued with the atmosphere of its time, *Baal* played a crucial role in the development of the German dramatist's ideas on theatre by "adumbrat[ing] concerns and techniques which were to be central to Brecht's writing for the rest of his life".⁷⁰

From a formal point of view, *Baal* has an episodic structure, which will later become a distinctive feature of Brecht's Epic Theatre. Its rapid cinematic succession of short scenes was, in turn, influenced by Büchner's *Woyzeck*, one of Kane's favourite plays. As the British dramatist admitted in an interview, even before proposing a new version of *Baal* to the Gate, she had already started working on her own adaptation of Brecht's first play:

before I'd even asked the Gate about doing *Baal* I'd already done some work on my version of it, so I had these scenes with Baal and various people. And when I looked at them again I actually thought this is the same character, so I can just use this material for *Phaedra's Love*. The scene with Hippolytus and the Priest was originally written for *Baal*.⁷¹

A description of *Baal's* eponymous protagonist, named after an ancient god of fertility, will be useful to illuminate his striking similarities to Kane's Hippolytus. Defined by Brecht himself as "antisocial (asozial) in an antisocial society",⁷² Baal is an amoral, lazy, fat, drunken, and lecherous poet living a bohemian life devoted to pleasure. In Speirs's terms, this Dionysian character "lives as an animal who 'dies as all animals die', a bundle of appetites, drives and sensations, the seat of an unceasing organic process of consumption and decay, for whom the enjoyment of this process is

⁷⁰ Tony Meech, "Brecht's Early Plays", in *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht*, 2nd edn, ed. by Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006; repr. 2008 [1st edn published in 1994]), pp. 65-77 (p. 70).

⁷¹ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 68.

⁷² Quoted in Ronald Gray, *Brecht: The Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 21.

all the ‘meaning’ there can be in life”.⁷³ Baal’s uninhibited life is entirely self-centred. This voracious man considers people just as objects: after a sexual intercourse, any woman merely becomes an anonymous and empty shell, “ein Haufen Fleisch, der kein Gesicht mehr hat”⁷⁴ of which he wants to free himself as soon as possible.

Like Kane’s Hippolytus, Baal is (probably) bisexual: later in the play he spends more and more time with his friend Ekart and admits “Ich mag kein Weib mehr...”.⁷⁵ The proverbial blindness of Phaedra’s illicit passion seems to echo Ekart’s feelings for Baal: when a minor character, Watzmann, affirms that Baal “wird immer ekelhafter”,⁷⁶ Ekart’s entrenches himself behind unconditional love: “Sage das nicht. Ich will das nicht hören: Ich liebe ihn. Ich nehme ihm nie irgendwas übel. Weil ich ihn liebe. Er ist ein Kind”.⁷⁷ However, love will not save Ekart: in a fit of jealousy, the object of his desire will turn into his butcher by stabbing him to death, just as Hippolytus will be the primary cause of Phaedra’s suicide.

In addition, it is reasonable to assume that Hippolytus’s deeply cynical attitude harks back to Baal: the relentless honesty of these larger-than-life figures makes them the most sincere characters in both plays. The straightforward nature of the hedonist poet staged by Brecht elicits a sympathetic response from the audience: like the lecherous and laconic prince in *Phaedra’s Love*, he seems to “become reluctantly likeable despite the abundance of unappealing qualities [] heap[ed] upon him and notwithstanding the destructive impact of his behavior on other characters”.⁷⁸ In both plays, the reader’s/spectator’s empathy reaches its climax in the final scenes, when the

⁷³ Speirs, p. 20.

⁷⁴ Bertolt Brecht, *Baal*, in Bertolt Brecht, *Erste Stücke: Baal, Trommeln in der Nacht, Im Dickicht der Städte* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965), p. 32.

⁷⁵ Brecht, *Baal*, p. 94.

⁷⁶ Brecht, *Baal*, p. 102.

⁷⁷ Brecht, *Baal*, p. 102.

⁷⁸ Babbage, p. 199.

death of the protagonist takes centre stage. While for Hippolytus the grotesque spectacle of his death is the most exciting event in his entire life, Baal merely accepts his demise “say[ing] nothing passionate”.⁷⁹ However, in a similar way, “he does express a reflective appreciation of life in general, in his final grunt. He is not heroic, or stoical, but amused and analytical, without self-pity”.⁸⁰

Baal and Hippolytus also display a considerable degree of affinity with Meursault, the protagonist of Camus’s first novel *L’Étranger*, one of the masterpieces of French literature. This enigmatic text, set in 1930s Algeria, “among a working-class *pied-noir* community”,⁸¹ tells the story of Meursault, a French citizen living in North Africa, who – after the funeral of his mother – unpremeditatedly kills a man. The first striking feature that Meursault shares with Baal and Hippolytus is his complete indifference towards other people. After receiving a telegram informing him of his mother’s death, Meursault is emotionally anesthetised and totally alienated from reality. Blurring temporal boundaries, he does not even know when she died: “Aujourd’hui, maman est morte. Ou peut-être hier, je ne sais pas. J’ai reçu un télégramme de l’asile : ‘Mère décédée. Enterrement demain. Sentiments distingués’. Cela ne veut rien dire. C’était peut-être hier”.⁸² Instead of expressing grief over his mother’s death, Meursault drinks coffee and smokes a cigarette next to the coffin. After the funeral, he even assumes, with disarming nonchalance, that, “somme toute, il n’y avait rien de changé”.⁸³

⁷⁹ Gray, p. 18.

⁸⁰ Gray, p. 18.

⁸¹ Adele King, “Introduction: After Fifty Years, Still a Stranger”, in *Camus’s L’Étranger: Fifty Years On*, ed. by Adele King (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 1-15 (p. 7).

⁸² Albert Camus, *L’Étranger* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1957 [1942]), p. 9.

⁸³ Camus, *L’Étranger*, p. 41.

Although he is less lustful and narcissistic than the other two characters, like Baal and Hippolytus, the protagonist of *L'Étranger* is not capable of loving another person. Though his lover Marie wants to spend the rest of her life with him, Meursault feels emotionally dry: “[...] elle m’a demandé si je l’aimais. Je lui ai répondu que cela ne voulait rien dire, mais qu’il me semblait que non”.⁸⁴ For him, Marie is just a face in a female crowd, nothing more than an anonymous object of desire among many others populating his mind: “Je ne pensais jamais à Marie particulièrement. Mais je pensais tellement à une femme, aux femmes, à toutes les circonstances où je les avais aimées, que ma cellule s’emplissait de tous les visages et se peuplait de mes désirs”.⁸⁵

Possibly the most significant textual similarities between Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* and Camus’s *L'Étranger* might be identified in their final pages. Even if Kane affirms that the scene featuring Hippolytus and the priest was originally written for her adaptation of *Baal*, thus acknowledging her debt to Brecht, there is a passage in Camus’s oblique work that is even more resonant. Towards the end of the novel, the condemned protagonist receives the unannounced visit of the prison chaplain, who tries vainly to convince him to repent of his sins – entirely in keeping with what will happen in *Phaedra’s Love*. Just like Hippolytus, Meursault does not believe in God and is visibly irritated by the priest’s affected compassion. He points out that the chaplain is not his father, thus he should not address him as ‘son’: “Il a essayé de changer de sujet en me demandant pourquoi je l’appelais ‘monsieur’ et non pas ‘mon père’. Cela m’a énervé et je lui ai répondu qu’il n’était pas mon père”.⁸⁶ In Scene Six of *Phaedra’s Love*, Kane clearly rewrites (and enacts) Camus’s text in her typically sparse style:

PRIEST: Son.

⁸⁴ Camus, *L'Étranger*, p. 59.

⁸⁵ Camus, *L'Étranger*, p. 121.

⁸⁶ Camus, *L'Étranger*, p. 182.

HIPPOLYTUS: You're not my father. He won't be visiting.⁸⁷

In addition, the visionary sentence closing *L'Étranger* seems to anticipate the final scene in Kane's play, staging Hippolytus's brutal lynching by an angry mob: "il me restait à souhaiter qu'il y ait beaucoup de spectateurs le jour de mon exécution et qu'ils m'accueillent avec des cris de haine".⁸⁸ In her final scene, as we shall see in the following sections, Kane graphically translates into action Camus's obscure words.

2. BODIES ON STAGE: GENERIC AMBIGUITY AND CONTEMPORARY POLITICS

2.1 When Funny Means Redeeming: The Tragic, The Comic, and the Grotesque

When I asked Graham Saunders what Sarah Kane was like, he smiled and said: "She was very nice. And funny. Really funny".⁸⁹ Then he told me a couple of amusing anecdotes. I think that Saunders's words are particularly revealing, in that they offer an unusual description of the *enfant terrible* of British theatre, grasping the true – and seemingly contradictory – essence of the young woman and writer. In spite of what has too often been said and written on her, Kane's *corpus* is indeed the output of a gentle soul and a lively and witty mind. Her irreverent and dark humour never let her down: even when she was extremely unhappy, it was an effective weapon against the darkest depths of her mind. This is well exemplified by the genesis of *Phaedra's Love*, defined by the author herself as "a comedy",⁹⁰ and a play that Kane wrote when she was "deeply

⁸⁷ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 92.

⁸⁸ Camus, *L'Étranger*, p. 186.

⁸⁹ Personal conversation with Saunders (London, 2 September 2015).

⁹⁰ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 70.

depressed”.⁹¹ Indeed, for Kane humour had “a life-saving” quality.⁹² The dramatist declared that when she was considering writing her *Phaedra*, she

read an article in a newspaper written by a man who’d been suffering from clinical depression for three years. And he said the only thing that he’d had to hang onto was this really morbid sense of humour. It was the only thing that made him bearable to be with. And that kept him rooted. I suppose that was the thing with *Phaedra’s Love*. I think when you are depressed oddly your sense of humour is the last thing to go; when that goes then you completely lose it. And actually Hippolytus never ever loses it.⁹³

The figure of the debauched and cynical prince Hippolytus gives a sense of the redemptive value of humour in her life and work: “He’s a complete shit, but he’s also very *funny*, and for me that’s always *redeeming*. I think there are people who can treat you really badly, but if they do it with a sense of humour, then you can forgive them”.⁹⁴ Pointing out what, in tragic terms, could be defined as the cathartic potential of the comic, Kane blurs and overlaps traditionally antithetic categories. In doing so, in a sense, she hints at the idea of generic cross-pollination, which is one of the most intriguing and less studied aspects of her work. Until now, the vast majority of critical studies on Kane’s output has tended to focus on her penchant for violence and bleakness, rather than considering how this interacts with the dark humour pervading her dramas, especially *Phaedra’s Love*.

The first and, to my knowledge, only thorough analysis of the pivotal role played by the comic in Kane’s work is Ken Urban’s essay entitled “The Body’s Cruel Joke: The Comic Theatre of Sarah Kane” (2007). Here, Urban argues that the “somewhat monochromatic portrait of her plays, where her pain authenticates or validates her

⁹¹ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 70.

⁹² Quoted in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 78.

⁹³ Quoted in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 78.

⁹⁴ Quoted in Saunders, *Kane on Kane*, p. 71 [my emphasis].

work”⁹⁵ is deeply influenced by the enormous impact of her premature death. The tragic nature of Kane’s suicide thus seems to cast a gloomy shadow even on the funniest lines of her plays. What Urban aims to demonstrate is that, in Kane’s dramatic output, “the laugh is as important as the gasp”,⁹⁶ because it forces the audience to reconsider graphic violence, “not as a release from the intensity of the spectacle, but as a reinforcement of its spectacular power”.⁹⁷ Urban’s book chapter revolves around the idea that laughing often hurts and stresses the intimate relationship between comedy and the body, “reaffirming the cruelty at the heart of the humour”.⁹⁸ However, strangely enough, he focuses primarily on *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, mentioning Kane’s ‘comedy’ just in passing.

It is no surprise that, when it comes to *Phaedra’s Love*, the majority of scholars mainly concentrate on the intertextual relationship between Kane’s version of the ancient myth and her classical sources which I have extensively discussed in the first part of this chapter. Instead, attention is rarely paid to the multilayered generic architecture of this contemporary rewriting, in which “preconceived notions”⁹⁹ such as the tragic and the comic often overlap, eliciting a mixed and discomfoting response from the audience. Drawing on Urban’s premise that, in Kane’s theatre, the comic often springs from the corporeal, this section seeks to address another gap in scholarship by exploring the generic intersections in this play.

The mixed reaction of the reviewers is particularly revealing about the ambiguities permeating *Phaedra’s Love*. Nearly all theatre critics who saw the first

⁹⁵ Ken Urban, “The Body’s Cruel Joke: The Comic Theatre of Sarah Kane”, in *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama*, ed. by Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst (Malden, MA, Oxford, and Chichester: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 149-70 (p. 166).

⁹⁶ Urban, “The Body’s Cruel Joke”, p. 150.

⁹⁷ Urban, “The Body’s Cruel Joke”, p. 150.

⁹⁸ Urban, “The Body’s Cruel Joke”, p. 151.

⁹⁹ John L. Styan, *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968 [1962]), p. vi.

production of Kane's *Phaedra* at the Gate in 1996 were disgusted by the "catalogue of masturbation, oral sex, rape and castration".¹⁰⁰ Nevertheless, at some point in their reviews, they used similar words to indicate the amusing quality of the play. The *Independent's* Paul Taylor, for instance, described Kane's writing as "laconic, often blackly funny",¹⁰¹ entirely in keeping with Michael Billington's words in the *Guardian* ("her dialogue is often laconically funny").¹⁰² In *What's On*, Samantha Marlowe even defined the play as "riotously entertaining",¹⁰³ while the *Evening Standard's* Kate Stratton affirmed that Kane brought "just the right laconic inflections and dark comic edge to her material".¹⁰⁴ It is no hard to see why: in *Phaedra's Love* Kane writes some of her funniest dialogues. Despite his despicable lifestyle, the most comic character in the play is undoubtedly Hippolytus. As Phaedra herself suggests in Scene Two, the remarkable popularity of the lecherous prince greatly depends on his humorousness:

PHAEDRA: He's very popular.

DOCTOR: Why?

PHAEDRA: He's funny.¹⁰⁵

With his cynical comments and disarming honesty, Hippolytus almost always guarantees a laugh. On the whole, Kane's sharp, witty, and unadorned speech, her short scenes and (mainly) domestic setting could be the major ingredients of a contemporary sitcom featuring the Royals. It is interesting to note that a couple of scholars have placed Kane's radical rewriting within the quintessentially English tradition of black humour and mentioned the influence of Monty Python and their re-invention of British comedy. For Brusberg-Kiermeier, Kane's play "could not have been written and

¹⁰⁰ Aleks Sierz, *Tribune*, 31 May 1996; *Theatre Record*, vol. XVI, no. 11 (1996), p. 651.

¹⁰¹ Paul Taylor, *Independent*, 23 May 1996; *Theatre Record*, vol. XVI, no. 11 (1996), pp. 651-2 (p. 652).

¹⁰² Michael Billington, *Guardian*, 21 May 1996; *Theatre Record*, vol. XVI, no. 11 (1996), p. 652.

¹⁰³ Samantha Marlowe, *What's On*, 29 May 1996; *Theatre Record*, vol. XVI, no. 11 (1996), p. 652.

¹⁰⁴ Kate Stratton, *Evening Standard*, 21 May 1996; *Theatre Record*, vol. XVI, no. 11 (1996), p. 653.

¹⁰⁵ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, pp. 66-67.

performed without the strong cultural impact of “Monty Pythons’ Flying Circus”.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Sean Carney argues that this Nineties Phaedra “is a thoroughly comic play, as if the Pythons had decided to stage a parody of the Royal family by starring them in a Roman tragedy”.¹⁰⁷ The opening lines in the play are a good instance of Hippolytus’s kind of humorousness:

HIPPOLYTUS: When was the last time you had a fuck?

PHAEDRA: That’s not the sort of question you should ask your stepmother.

HIPPOLYTUS: Not Theseus, then. Don’t suppose he’s keeping it dry either.¹⁰⁸

Even if the comic peppers the entire play, reducing *Phaedra’s Love* to a comedy might be simplistic and misleading. Indeed, Kane does not limit herself to transforming an ancient tragedy into a postmodern comedy. Rather, by discarding the rules of the noblest dramatic genre, the dramatist intermingles traditionally irreconcilable modes. While Hippolytus seduces the readers/audience with his funny and witty lines, the most overtly tragic figure in the play is Phaedra, “[t]he only person” – as Carney puts it – “who doesn’t know she is in a parody of tragedy”.¹⁰⁹ Phaedra’s story is a sad tale of unrequited love for her stepson (“[a] spear in my side, burning”).¹¹⁰ When she reveals her blind passion to Strophe, who in this scene functions as a classical chorus, in the best romantic tradition the queen is convinced that she and her son are destined to be together: “PHAEDRA: There’s a thing between us, an awesome fucking thing, can you feel it? It burns. Meant to be. We were. Meant to be”.¹¹¹ Cursed by this obsession, Phaedra “[c]an’t switch this off. Can’t crush it. Can’t”.¹¹² Acting like a proper tragic heroine, the queen hangs herself in the name of her illicit love. Things come full circle

¹⁰⁶ Brusberg-Kiermeier, p. 169.

¹⁰⁷ Sean Carney, *The Politics and Poetics of Contemporary English Tragedy* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 2013), p. 272.

¹⁰⁸ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 74.

¹⁰⁹ Carney, p. 273.

¹¹⁰ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 69.

¹¹¹ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 71.

¹¹² Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 71.

in Scene Seven, when Phaedra's body, which "*lies on a funeral pyre, covered*",¹¹³ actually "*goes up in flames*"¹¹⁴ as the result of that burning passion consuming her heart and soul.¹¹⁵

While Phaedra, as we have seen, is rooted in the symbolic dimension,¹¹⁶ from the outset, Hippolytus is defined by his spoiled body, whose ostension opens and closes the play. The first scene stages the decadent prince, alone, watching TV "*in a darkened room*".¹¹⁷ Kane's stage directions are extremely detailed: Hippolytus "*is sprawled on a sofa surrounded by expensive electronic toys, empty crisp and sweets packets, and a scattering of used socks and underwear*".¹¹⁸ This bodily position provides us with a clue about his equally lecherous and nihilistic attitude: "sprawled" like a lascivious Roman Emperor, Hippolytus does not care about anything or anyone but himself, and is governed by his appetites. He is eating unhealthy food and watching a violent American film without any emotional involvement:

He sniffs.
He feels a sneeze coming on and rubs his nose to stop it.
It still irritates him.
He looks around the room and picks up a sock.
He examines the sock carefully then blows his nose on it.
He throws the sock back on the floor and continues to eat the hamburger.
The film becomes particularly violent.
HIPPOLYTUS watches impassively.
He picks up another sock, examines it and discards it.
He picks up another, examines it and decides it's fine.
He puts his penis into the sock and masturbates until he comes without a flicker of pleasure.
He takes off the sock and throws it on the floor.

¹¹³ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 97.

¹¹⁴ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 97.

¹¹⁵ "Phaedra repeatedly describes her desire for Hippolytus as burning – "You burn me" (84) she tells him. This emotional experience is, after her suicide, translated into a physical one when her body is burnt on a pyre". Clare Wallace, *Suspect Cultures: Narrative, Identity & Citation in 1990s New Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006), p. 219.

¹¹⁶ See Bexley, pp. 371-3.

¹¹⁷ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 65.

¹¹⁸ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 65.

*He begins another hamburger.*¹¹⁹

I have quoted the opening stage directions at length because they accurately describe Hippolytus's degraded body, which might be defined as grotesque in Mikhail Bakhtin's terms. The figure of the decadent prince starkly contrasts with the perfection and stability of the classical image of the body, a self-contained system characterised by a "closed, smooth, and impenetrable surface"¹²⁰ acting as a barrier between the body and the outer reality. Hippolytus's mechanical sequence of actions (eating, sniffing, sneezing, blowing his nose on a sock, masturbating into another one, and eating again) enacts the constant interchange between his body and the world through permeable borders: "[a]ll these convexities and orifices have a common characteristic; it is within them that the confines between bodies and between the body and the world are overcome: there is an interchange and an interorientation".¹²¹ Food entering his mouth ("through which enters the world to be swallowed up"¹²²) and fluids (mucus and semen) oozing from his nose and genital organs blur the boundaries between the organic dimension and the inorganic space. As a result, the prince's body is highly ambiguous: on the one hand, his physical desires may seem to be life-affirming, while on the other, his fat, motionless, and disturbing body suggests the idea of decay. One of the defining characteristics of the grotesque is indeed the fusion of contrasts: the audience is equally amused and disgusted by a depraved body that causes both laughter and discomfort.¹²³ This grotesque representation of Hippolytus's body well exemplifies Kane's constant interplay between tragic *pathos* and comic *bathos*. In the first scene of the play, as

¹¹⁹ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 65.

¹²⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 317.

¹²¹ Bakhtin, p. 317.

¹²² Bakhtin, p. 317.

¹²³ See Philip Thomson, *The Grotesque* (London: Methuen, 1972).

Carney puts it, “[t]ragic representation has been dragged down beyond the level of the body and into the realm of soiled underpants and junk food”.¹²⁴ Hippolytus’s grotesque body produces another anticlimax in Scene Four. After confessing her unconditional love, Phaedra performs oral sex on the prince who absent-mindedly receives her carnal present, “*watch[ing] the screen throughout*”.¹²⁵ The *pathos* of Phaedra’s declaration of love is thus subverted by a sexual act which is meaningless for Hippolytus.

However, the scene in which generic cross-pollination is most evident is undeniably the final one, staging Hippolytus’s lynching “[*o*]utside the court”.¹²⁶ The number of deaths in Scene Eight (Strophe’s, Theseus’s, and Hippolytus’s) would probably qualify the ending of the play as the climax of a tragedy. Nevertheless, the amount of extreme bodily violence – whose function will be discussed in the following section on the politics of dismemberment – does not prevent us from detecting some comic elements in the scene.

As we have seen, the result of this merging of opposite modes is the grotesque, an aesthetic category which triggers off a typically ambivalent, mixed reaction. In this final bloodbath, Hippolytus’s body takes centre stage: after being strangled with a tie by an unnamed man and subsequently “*kicked by the WOMEN as he chokes into semi-consciousness*”¹²⁷, the prince is deprived of his genitals, which are grotesquely grilled:

MAN 1 *pulls down HIPPOLYTUS’ trousers.*
WOMAN 2 *cuts off his genitals.*
*They are thrown onto the barbecue.*¹²⁸

The atrocity of this mutilation is followed by that kind of cruel laughter which, as Urban would suggest, enhances the violent spectacle taking place in the theatrical arena. The

¹²⁴ Carney, p. 273.

¹²⁵ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 81.

¹²⁶ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 98.

¹²⁷ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, pp. 100-1.

¹²⁸ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 101.

laughter here is even crueller and more disturbing, considering that it comes from children:

*The children cheer.
A child takes them off the barbecue and throws them at another child, who
screams and runs away.
Much laughter.
Someone retrieves them and they are thrown to a dog.*¹²⁹

After that, Hippolytus is savagely cut “from groin to chest”¹³⁰ and his “bowels are torn out and thrown onto the barbecue”¹³¹, then – in an escalation of violence – he is “kicked and stoned and spat on”.¹³² Clare Wallace points out that this dismemberment is highly symbolical: “[t]he very organs he has overused and abused with indifference (his genitals and stomach), are those which are violently taken from him”.¹³³ Notably, in a Bakhtinian perspective, these two bodily parts, the phallus and the bowels,

play the leading role in the grotesque image, and it is precisely for this reason that they are predominantly subject to positive exaggeration, to hyperbolization; they can even detach themselves from the body and lead an independent life, for they hide the rest of the body, as something secondary.¹³⁴

Besides the bowels and the genitals, Bakhtin also stresses the importance of the nose, the mouth, and the anus. Except for the latter, all these areas of Hippolytus’s body, to a larger or lesser extent, are referred to in the play. Acts such as

[e]ating, drinking, defecation and other elimination (sweating, blowing of the nose, sneezing), as well as copulation, pregnancy, dismemberment, swallowing up by another body [...] are performed on the confines of the body and the outer world, or on the confines of the old and new body. In all these events the beginning and end of life are closely linked and interwoven”.¹³⁵

¹²⁹ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 101.

¹³⁰ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 101.

¹³¹ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 101.

¹³² Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 101.

¹³³ Wallace, p. 219.

¹³⁴ Bakhtin, p. 317.

¹³⁵ Bakhtin, p. 317.

The final moments of Scene Eight stage the dismembered prince being eaten by vultures like a twentieth-century Prometheus, who – in an epiphanic revelation – smiles and affirms: “If there could have been more moments like this”.¹³⁶ Oscillating between life and death, this powerful image reinforces one more time the intermingling of the tragic and the comic, of *pathos* and *bathos* peculiar to *Phaedra’s Love*.

2.2 Corrupted Bodies: The Politics of Dismemberment

The history of theatre is also the history of spectacular violence and provocation at large.¹³⁷ More specifically, Dan Rebellato points out that the British stage has always had a

a long fascination with distorting, injuring, mutilating and dissecting human bodies. It goes back as far as the earliest forms of scripted theatre in Britain, in the representations of the Crucifixion from the medieval pageant plays, and of course is evident in the gouging out of eyes in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* or the many atrocities that punctuate *Titus Andronicus*.¹³⁸

More than at any other time in its history, in the past two decades British theatre has been characterised by “a proliferation of images involving bodily mutilation and dismemberment”.¹³⁹ Examples of this theatrical display of physical atrocities may include Martin Crimp’s *The Treatment* (1993) with its a powerful eye-gouging scene strongly reminiscent of *King Lear*, and one which possibly inspired later plays by a

¹³⁶ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 103.

¹³⁷ For “A Brief History of Provocation”, see Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), pp. 10-30.

¹³⁸ Dan Rebellato, “Violence and the Body: Dissecting Recent British Drama”, *Anglo Files*, 126 (2002), pp. 15-26 (p. 15).

¹³⁹ Dan Rebellato, “‘Because It Feels Fucking Amazing’: Recent British Drama and Bodily Mutilation”, in *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, ed. by Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 192-207 (p. 192).

younger generation of dramatists, including Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane.¹⁴⁰ Between 1995 and 1998, also Kane's first three plays indeed prominently featured mutilation and dismemberment. In *Blasted*, Ian's eyes are sucked out, bitten off and subsequently eaten; in *Phaedra's Love* Hippolytus is entirely dismembered; and in *Cleansed*, the bodies of the characters are broken apart by a sadistic 'doctor', Tinker.¹⁴¹ The beginning of the new millennium provides new instances of bodily dissection, as Rebellato implies. David Greig's *San Diego* (2003) features the character of Laura who cuts bits of herself off, cooks them and feeds them to her boyfriend, while the protagonist of Ravenhill's dystopian play, evocatively entitled *The Cut* (2006), performs an ambiguous surgical procedure.

As said, the proliferation of cruel images enacting this obsession with the body is the most distinctive feature of the so-called 'in-yer-face theatre', which, in the words of Aleks Sierz, was characterised by "its intensity, its deliberate relentlessness and its ruthless commitment to extremes".¹⁴² However, in Nineties Britain, taboo-breaking images did not proliferate exclusively on the stage, but – more widely – "in the art world; in the work of the Young British Artists, bodies were distended, preserved, miniaturized, parodied, punctured and transplanted".¹⁴³ This is well exemplified by *Sensation*, the controversial art exhibition of Charles Saatchi's contemporary collection – including various artworks by the YBAs – which took place at the Royal Academy of Art, London, in 1997 and later toured to Berlin and New York. Rebellato stresses some

¹⁴⁰ "Before the in-yer-face 1990s playwrights emerged, Crimp anticipated this contemporary sensibility: the scenes in *The Treatment*, when Jennifer performs oral sex on Andrew and then spits the contents of her mouth into an ashtray, or when Anne and Clifford tear out Clifford's eyes, anticipate the shocking stage images of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill". Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), p. 168.

¹⁴¹ On the role of the body in Kane's second play *Cleansed*, see my article "Dealing with Bodies: The Corporeal Dimension in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed* and Martin Crimp's *The Country*", *JCDE: Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 1 (2013), pp. 137-48.

¹⁴² Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. xiii.

¹⁴³ Rebellato, "'Because It Feels Fucking Amazing', pp. 193-4.

considerable similarities between the imagery of Sensation and Kane's sensational and shocking images:

Kane's *Cleansed* seemed to pick up – perhaps unconsciously – on the show's images of bodily distortion and dismemberment, just as Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* seemed to tune into the mixture of brutality and comedy in Quentin Tarantino's films *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994).¹⁴⁴

As these examples suggest, in Nineties Britain, the body was the tempting and vulnerable target of several writers and artists, who (ab)used and corrupted it through their creative violence: “Throughout the culture, bodies were under attack: distorted, distended, dismembered”.¹⁴⁵ Deprived of their limbs and organs, these mutilated physical beings were far from being meaningless objects. Rather, as grotesquely devoid shells of a fragmented, postmodern Self entrapped in dysfunctional relationships with the Other, their borders became more permeable, facilitating the intersections and clashes between the body, culture, and society. In other words, as Colette Conroy puts it in her *Theatre & the Body* (2010), “[t]he body is a way of thinking about the points of connection between the person and the world. It is a way of thinking about the flesh or matter or morphology or biology of a person, and about how that conflicts with, connects with or constitutes culture”.¹⁴⁶

In *Phaedra's Love*, Hippolytus's figure provides a striking instance of those bodies savagely assaulted in the theatrical arena. While the affective impact of Kane's graphic violence has been extensively discussed by other scholars, my concern in this section lies with the political overtones of the public dismemberment of a contemporary prince corrupted by lust and power. First idealised and idolised as frequently happens

¹⁴⁴ Rebellato, “‘Because It Feels Fucking Amazing’”, p. 194.

¹⁴⁵ Rebellato, “‘Because It Feels Fucking Amazing’”, p. 194.

¹⁴⁶ Colette Conroy, *Theatre & the Body* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 32.

within celebrity culture, Hippolytus's body is subsequently torn into pieces by the discontent of those who previously admired it.

As seen above, from the very first scene of *Phaedra's Love*, the protagonist is dysfunctional, overweight, voracious, yet his apathetic body becomes the pivot on which the play revolves. Though he is extremely popular among his subjects (STROPHE: "They do love him. Everyone loves him"),¹⁴⁷ the lecherous and unemotional prince (ironically defined by his stepsister and former lover as "a sexual disaster area"¹⁴⁸) is aware that his considerable appeal lies exclusively in his royal blood: "Everyone wants a royal cock, I should know. [...] Or a royal cunt if that's your preference".¹⁴⁹

Despite the tragic events unfolding outside his luxuriously claustrophobic cocoon, the celebration of the prince's birthday is the only thing that matters, as Hippolytus himself cynically claims: "News. Another rape. Child murdered. War somewhere. Few thousand jobs gone. But none of this matters 'cause it's a royal birthday".¹⁵⁰ However, this alienated and depressed prince does not care about ordinary people and ignores the birthday presents they bring to the palace gate – the barrier between royalty and the rest of the world. In essence, he despises them for loving him:

PHAEDRA: People brought them to the gate. I think they'd like to have given them to you in person. Taken photos.

HIPPOLYTUS: They're poor.

PHAEDRA: Yes, isn't it charming?

HIPPOLYTUS: It's revolting. (*He opens a present.*) What the fuck am I going to do with a bagatelle?

What's this? (*He shakes a present.*) Letter bomb. Get rid of this tat, give it to Oxfam, I don't need it.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁷ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 72.

¹⁴⁸ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 73.

¹⁴⁹ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 74.

¹⁵⁰ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 74.

¹⁵¹ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 75.

Paradoxically, everybody wants Hippolytus's grotesque body – the more repulsive he gets, the more sex he has:

HIPPOLYTUS: [...]

Women find me much more attractive since I've become fat. They think I must have a secret.

(He blows his nose on the sock and discards it.)

I'm fat. I'm disgusting. I'm miserable.
But I get lots of sex. Therefore...? ¹⁵²

By contrast, however, he seems to start falling in public esteem:

PHAEDRA: It's a token of their esteem.

HIPPOLYTUS: Less than last year. ¹⁵³

This becomes evident towards the end of the play, when unnamed members of an angry mob, hugely disappointed by Hippolytus's rape charge, wait for the prince outside the court. The theatrical space is transformed into a spectacular arena where the whole community gathers to see (and participate in) this public show. This crowd is formed by people coming from various parts of the country who are eager to 'attend' this spectacular trial and attack Hippolytus:

THESEUS: Come far?

MAN 1: Newcastle.

WOMAN 1: Brought the kids.

CHILD: And a barby. [barbecue]

MAN 1: String him up, they should.

WOMAN 2: The bastard.

MAN 1: Whole fucking pack of them.

WOMAN 1: Set an example.

MAN 1: What do they take us for?

WOMAN 1: Parasites.

MAN 2: We pay the raping bastard.

MAN 1: No more. ¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, pp. 77-78.

¹⁵³ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 75.

¹⁵⁴ Kane, *Phaedra's Love*, p. 98.

The subjects accuse their prince of being a “bastard”,¹⁵⁵ reiterating this epithet like a refrain throughout the final scene. Their harsh words show how the reputation of the monarchy is crumbling and the public support for the royal family inexorably declining. But the crowd is not formed exclusively by ordinary people. Theseus, who disguises himself and joins the mob, believes his son guilty of raping his wife Phaedra. Driven by a desire for revenge, the head of the Establishment actively participates in the public execution of “the corrupting element”¹⁵⁶ of the family. When he finally emerges, Hippolytus “*breaks free from the POLICEMEN holding him and hurls himself into the crowd*”.¹⁵⁷ The prince literally offers his corrupt body to the hostile men, women, and children who are increasingly impatient to inflict violence on him. In doing so, Hippolytus’s body becomes “a zero, a mere site on which society [...] can inscribe itself”.¹⁵⁸ And yet, interestingly, before being tortured by this Bacchic community, the prince “*falls into the arms*”¹⁵⁹ of the head of the family, Theseus:

MAN 1: Kill him. Kill the royal slag.
 HIPPOLYTUS *looks into THESEUS’ face*.
 HIPPOLYTUS: You.
 THESEUS *hesitates, then kisses him full on the lips and pushes him into the arms of* MAN 2.
 THESEUS: Kill him.
 MAN 2 *holds* HIPPOLYTUS.
 MAN 1 *takes a tie from around a child’s neck and puts it around* HIPPOLYTUS’ *throat. He strangles* HIPPOLYTUS, *who is kicked by the* WOMEN *as he chokes into semi-consciousness*.
 WOMAN 2 *produces a knife*.¹⁶⁰

Here, Kane’s imagery veers towards the religious dimension: as Bexley observes, the prince “becomes a kind of Jesus figure”, while the king “resembles Judas when he

¹⁵⁵ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 98.

¹⁵⁶ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 99.

¹⁵⁷ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 100.

¹⁵⁸ Rebellato, “‘Because It Feels Fucking Amazing’”, p. 195.

¹⁵⁹ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 100.

¹⁶⁰ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, pp. 100-1.

kisses Hippolytus before throwing him into the hostile arms of the waiting crowd”.¹⁶¹ But Theseus is not the only member of the royal family present in this scene. His stepdaughter and former lover Strophe is hidden in the crowd (in disguise) to defend her beloved Hippolytus (“I’ll stand by you”,¹⁶² “I’ll help you hide”¹⁶³). Defined by Hippolytus “as a pseudo-princess”,¹⁶⁴ the young woman is the only one who has not been corrupted by royal power and is willing to sacrifice herself for the “[s]ake of the family”¹⁶⁵:

HIPPOLYTUS: Strange. The one person in this family who has no claim to its history is the most sickeningly loyal. Poor relation who wants to be what she never will.¹⁶⁶

Strophe meets her end in a tragic way: she is raped and killed by the king, who fails to recognise her in the crowd. Having no royal blood, the young woman is just a faceless subject among others, repudiated by the dysfunctional family she wanted to keep together and physically abused by those ‘legitimately’ in power.

Even more interestingly, in the first (gory) production directed by Kane herself, the spectators could be considered part of the riotous mob as well. The theatrical boundaries between the stage and the audience were blurred by Kane, who placed the perpetrators of violence in the middle of the audience, as Christine Woodworth notes:

Planting actors in the audience implies that we are not only complicit in the violence enacted before us, but that we participate in it as well. Despite the knowledge that the audience turned mob was planted beforehand, the scene positions the “real” audience members in the midst of the violence.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶¹ Bexley, p. 379.

¹⁶² Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 88.

¹⁶³ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 91.

¹⁶⁴ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 87.

¹⁶⁵ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 88.

¹⁶⁶ Kane, *Phaedra’s Love*, p. 88.

¹⁶⁷ Christine Woodworth, “‘Summon Up the Blood’: The Stylized (or Sticky) Stuff of Violence in Three Plays by Sarah Kane”, *Theatre Symposium*, 18 (2010), pp. 11-22 (p. 16).

Therefore, the audience at the Gate Theatre did not merely attend a shocking and visceral performance staging blood, violent deaths and physical dismemberment,¹⁶⁸ but also felt part of that community aggressively reacting against the body of power. In that tiny theatrical space, bodies intermingled, overlapped, and interacted with one another, generating a network of corporeal reverberations rich in political echoes.

Before concluding this section, it is worth stressing that the politics of Kane's drama is never explicit. In line with other critics, Urban has rightly observed that "her work is not political [...] in any traditional sense. No programme is espoused; no solutions are proposed. Characters do not represent any clear divide between good and evil, victim and victimizer; there is no clear message, no commitment to a specific goal".¹⁶⁹ *Phaedra's Love* perfectly exemplifies this point: Kane does not have a political agenda and it is reasonable to argue that she never provides the audience with easy solutions. Since she blurs ethical boundaries, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between the abused and the abusers. Hippolytus, for instance, after abusing his body and his sexual partners' emotions, is in turn physically abused by the social body. This ambiguity does not merely concern the *dramatis personae*, but also the blurred relationship between the onstage and the offstage.

Bearing this in mind, I have deliberately been cautious about drawing explicit parallels to the House of Windsor. Initially, it was tempting to compare Kane's

¹⁶⁸ "We made a decision that I would try to do the violence as realistically as possible. If it didn't work then we'd try something else. But that was the starting point to see how it went. And the very first time when we did the final scene with all the blood and the false bowels by the end of it we were all severely traumatized. All the actors were standing there covered in blood having just raped and slit their throats; and then one of them said, 'this is the most disgusting play I've ever been in', and he walked out. But because of the work we'd done before, all of us knew that point was reached because of a series of emotional journeys that had been made. So none of us felt it was unjustified, it was just completely unpleasant... And it turned out to be a lot easier than you would think it is. I mean you write something like *his bowels are torn out*, and that seemed an incredibly difficult thing to do. But actually audiences are really willing to believe something is happening if you give them the slightest suggestion that it is". Quoted in Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 80 [original emphasis].

¹⁶⁹ Urban, "The Body's Cruel Joke", p. 155.

characters to some glamorous members of the British royal family and examine this theme in detail.¹⁷⁰ After all, Kane herself stated:

It [Seneca's *Phaedra*] depicts a sexually corrupt royal family so it's completely contemporary. This was long before Diana [Princess of Wales] died. But there is all that stuff in the last scene of *Phaedra's Love* about the most popular person in the royal family dying and so on. Now would be a really good time for a production here [in Britain].¹⁷¹

Even if it is perfectly reasonable to justify this kind of association, focusing on the scandals surrounding the Windsor family in the early to mid Nineties might be misleading. Kane's play has a wider scope: her critique of British royalty, in a sense, relocates and reframes Seneca's veiled attack on the corruption of the Roman power elite. As the classicist Zina Giannopoulou observes: "The ruthlessly honest portrayal of a spoiled prince, given over to the joyless consumption of material goods and to an appreciation of the world as depicted on television, echoes the morally and politically complacent Rome of Seneca's time".¹⁷² Crossing temporal and spatial borders, *Phaedra's Love* is not a state-of-the-nation play. Dismembering and re-membering its hypotext/s, Kane's palimpsestic critique of power achieves much more universal overtones. Her typical "lack of geographical specificity"¹⁷³ prevents the

¹⁷⁰ Some distinguished Kane scholars have already shown this association. Saunders, for example, has identified some similarities between the female characters in the play and the Princess of Wales: "Kane also uses the characters of Phaedra and Strophe to comment upon and draw parallels to the British royal family. Both mother and daughter are depicted as outsiders to the royal household, and in a cynical move are brought in by the old order in an attempt to refresh and restore its mystique". *Love Me or Kill Me*, p. 75. Brusberg-Kiermeier, has been more daring: "Kane implies that a royal stepmother falling in love with the princely stepson is a plot construction that suggests itself when the royal family of your own nation can boast of a prospective king with a beloved mistress, a prospective queen who enjoys sex with her equerry in the royal stables and a princess who has her toes licked by a lover in a fashionable seaside resort" (p. 168).

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Saunders, *About Kane*, p. 67.

¹⁷² Zina Giannopoulou, "Staging Power: The Politics of Sex and Death in Seneca's *Phaedra* and Kane's *Phaedra's Love*, in *Sarah Kane in Context*, pp. 57-67 (p. 58).

¹⁷³ Hallie Rebecca Marshall, "Saxon Violence and Social Decay in Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* and Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*", *Helios*, 38 (2011), pp. 165-79 (p. 171).

audience/readers from isolating a well-defined context and particular references, adding a transnational and transhistorical dimension to the politics of her plays.¹⁷⁴

3. SARAH KANE: “A CONTEMPORARY WRITER WITH A CLASSICAL SENSIBILITY”

Mark Ravenhill opened the *Independent* obituary he wrote after Sarah Kane’s suicide by stating that she “was a contemporary writer with a classical sensibility who created a theatre of great moments of beauty and cruelty, a theatre to which it was only possible to respond with a sense of awe”.¹⁷⁵ His words vividly describe the paradoxes permeating the output of a young and talented writer constantly oscillating between biographical, dramatic, and theatrical extremes, between literary tradition and her instinctive dissection and original re-assemblage of the canon.

Focusing on her appropriation of a mythical narrative in *Phaedra’s Love*, this chapter has explored Kane’s penchant for a radical kind of intertextuality. The first macro-section has concentrated on her textual dismemberment and re-memberment of a body of hypotexts, especially Seneca’s ancient tragedy, but also a couple of European sources. The second part, instead, has examined the role of the body in Kane’s drama, showing how her rewriting is rooted in a generic hybridisation largely derived from her peculiar use of the physical. Here, I have suggested that Kane’s pervasive ostension of the dismembered body, a distinctive feature of British theatre in the ‘Nasty Nineties’, is a major vehicle for her satire on the emotional, moral, and sexual corruption of power. Staging a “dramatic world [which] oscillates between ironical topicality and mythical

¹⁷⁴ See Anette Pankratz, “Neither Here nor There: Theatrical Space in Kane’s Work”, in *Sarah Kane in Context*, pp. 149-60.

¹⁷⁵ Mark Ravenhill, “Obituary: Sarah Kane”, *Independent*, 23 February 1999 (available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/obituary-sarah-kane-1072624.html>, last accessed 06 October 2015).

universality”,¹⁷⁶ Kane cleverly points to the dysfunctional royal family of her country but, at the same time, crosses national and historical borders through her personal demythologisation of ‘the classical’.

¹⁷⁶ Pankratz, “Neither Here nor There”, p. 152.

CASE STUDIES:

2. DEMYSTIFYING AND REMEDIATING AESCHYLUS:

TONY HARRISON'S *PROMETHEUS* (1998)

Reception Studies examine the journey of classical referents, a multifaceted transmigration which, as previously noted, is not only involved in the ongoing interchange between the past and the present, but also in a kind of “‘lateral’ dialogue in which crossing boundaries of place or language or genre is as important as crossing those of time”.¹ Hardwick’s three categories (place, language, genre) and the respective strategies (relocation, rewriting, and remediation) that have been discussed earlier in this thesis, will underpin my exploration of the intriguing routes by which the myth of the philanthropic Titan who stole fire from the Gods to give it to humankind has moved from its classical roots to contemporaneity.

More specifically, this chapter will focus on Tony Harrison’s ambitious and provocative reworking of – among other sources – *Prometheus Bound*, the tragedy attributed to Aeschylus.² In a unique way, this contemporary appropriation not only

¹ Lorna Hardwick, *Reception Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4.

² “Aeschylus wrote several plays about Prometheus, including his *Prometheus Unbound* in which Heracles freed the Titan generations after the action of *Prometheus Bound*, and at least one satyr play about the original theft of fire. He may have written a tetralogy of which our extant play is the only surviving constituent. *Prometheus Unbound*, through Shelley’s synonymous lyrical drama (1820, inspired by what he had learned from the fragmentary remains of the ancient tragedy), has been one of the most influential lost plays in cultural history. Many scholars have doubted that the wonderful play that we do have is by the same poet responsible for the other plays attributed to Aeschylus. The proportion of the play performed by the chorus is indeed much smaller than in the other Aeschylean tragedies; the Oceanids perform a percentage of the verse which we would expect in one by Sophocles. There are also differences from the rest of Aeschylus in the way that dialogue and verse forms are handled, as well as stylistic idiosyncrasies; in terms of content, it has been argued that the picture of Zeus is incompatible with that in the *Oresteia* and that the Protagorean influence on Athenian thought – usually thought to have commenced in the 440s – postdates Aeschylus’ death in 456 BCE. But none of these supposed objections

rewrites, displaces, and relocates the figure of Prometheus to twentieth-century Britain and Europe, but also transmigrates the Greek myth to a different medium (cinema) through the art of poetry. This peculiar kind of hybridisation thus provides an outstanding example of remediation and, at the same time, exemplifies the versatility of one of the leading British authors. As the former director of the National Theatre Richard Eyre observes, “[p]oet and playwright are usually seen as mutually opposed roles – the poet a solitary figure answerable to no one but his own talent and conscience, the playwright a collaborator, colluding in the pragmatism and expediency of production, and the approval of the audience”.³ However, Harrison does not believe in these kinds of categories: he hates “being called poet/dramatist/translator/director” because, for him, the term “poet covers it all” (and by ‘all’ he means his “inwardness, [...] tenderness, [and] [...] political rage”).⁴

Harrison’s 1998 interventionist film/poem (a hybrid and innovative art form on which I will concentrate later in this chapter), “was screened at some esoteric venues, broadcast on UK Channel 4 television, and subsequently disappeared almost completely from public view. Outside the UK it has made little impression”.⁵ For Edith Hall, Harrison’s audacious version of the Prometheus myth, made on a small budget of 1.5

to Aeschylean authorship is insuperable, since a good poet can change his style to suit his subject-matter, and we know almost nothing about the intellectual culture of the 450s. The sheer cosmic scale of the thinking in the play certainly parallels that of the *Oresteia*, as does the grandeur of the imagery and diction. I suspect that we have a play by Aeschylus that may have been radically revised in performance, like most Greek tragedies, before they were finally written down in what was intended to be canonical form late in the fourth century BCE”. Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 230 [original emphasis].

³ Richard Eyre, “Tony Harrison the Playwright”, in *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, ed. by Sandie Byrne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 43-48 (p. 43).

⁴ Quoted in Stephen Moss, “Tony Harrison: Still Open for Business”, *Guardian*, 26 February 2015 (available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/feb/26/tony-harrison-celebration-winner-2015-david-cohen-prize>, last accessed 17 October 2015).

⁵ Edith Hall, “Tony Harrison’s *Prometheus*: A View from the Left”, *Arion*, 10 (2002), pp. 129-40 (p. 129).

million pounds and produced in association with the Arts Council of England,⁶ is one of contemporary British cinema's best-kept secrets because of the radical nature of this rewriting, which "draws epic inferences from a very specific and very controversial political event, albeit the landmark conflict in British postwar socio-economic history".⁷ Indeed, although *Prometheus* is set in the 1990s, it openly hints at the 1970s and 1980s fights between the Conservatives and the communities of miners, Margaret Thatcher's so-called "enemy within". Harrison places some crucial socio-political references at the very beginning of his film: recurring close-ups of a copy of the *Doncaster Star* announcing the imminent closure of the last Yorkshire pit – with a picture of the Tory politician Michael Heseltine – and reviewing the miners' struggle from 1984 to the 1990s, and a collection of press cuttings about this issue inadvertently destroyed in the fire by a young boy.

1. PLACE: THE POLITICS OF RELOCATION

In his recent volume *Greek Tragedy on Screen* (2013), the classicist Pantelis Michelakis argues that, in filmic adaptations of Hellenic plays, landscapes "at the crossroads between the actual and the symbolic, the personal and the collective"⁸ are not mere backdrops to the cine-dramatic plot and characters. Far from being a simplistic aesthetic device, (re)location is thus an extremely important strategy in Harrison's rewriting of Aeschylus's tragedy *Prometheus Bound*. The film/poem opens in

⁶ "Sometimes it shows. Some of the most cataclysmic sequences, when the whole world seems involved in endless struggle and conflagration, might well have profited from sleeker production values. But the tiny budget may have had a beneficial impact: Harrison believes that great art requires almost preternatural effort, and the fact that the film was physically extremely arduous to make [...] probably enhances the sense of exertion and struggle which is conveyed throughout". Hall, p. 138.

⁷ Hall, p. 132.

⁸ Pantelis Michelakis, *Greek Tragedy on Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 193.

Yorkshire, at dawn, when “[t]he sun [is] ris[ing] between steaming cooling towers”,⁹ as Harrison himself indicates in the screenplay published by Faber and Faber (1998). This is a crucial day for the local mining community: the pit is about to close.

Harrison portrays three male generations of an ordinary family, equally affected by this traumatic event: the Old Man (a retired miner – afflicted by lung cancer – who will embody the twentieth-century Prometheus), his son working his last day in the local mine, and his grandson, a schoolboy who is learning about the philanthropic Titan’s myth, a lively kid who will never work in the pit, sadly “doomed, *doomed*, [...] destined [...] to be *nowt!*”.¹⁰ The first sequence of this verse-film is visually rooted in Northern England’s historical and geo-cultural dimension, a crucial component in the poet’s work. As Sandie Byrne suggests,

Leeds and Yorkshire provided the social and cultural circumstances necessary for Harrison’s development into the poet he is, but perhaps because it is a county of wild beauty and industrial decay, poor weather and poverty, a strong sense of selfhood and strongly marked dialects, Yorkshire also resembles an extension of the Harrison persona, a huge site of contradictions.¹¹

From the very beginning, the iconic Yorkshire cooling towers, “*wheez[ing]like a giant version of a smoker’s lungs, the lungs of the OLD MAN*”,¹² show the unhealthy consequences of the destructive fire of technology and the brutal impact of man’s irresponsible industrialization on the local environment. In a couple of shots, the concrete steaming towers stand out against a blue sky, enhancing the contrast between the beauty of nature and industrial degradation. The opening scenes are interspersed with specific references, such as the above-mentioned newspaper cuttings about the past and present strikes, which help the audience to locate Harrison’s rewriting. In addition,

⁹ Tony Harrison, *Prometheus* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 3.

¹⁰ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 55 [original emphasis].

¹¹ Sandie Byrne, *H, v. & O: The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 113.

¹² Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 4.

the interior and exterior of the miners' houses look distinctively British and the band playing in the street might be considered "a straggling remnant of a once great tradition, promenading and playing out the last shift of the closing colliery".¹³

Apart from the Kirkby pit, in the first part of Harrison's *Prometheus*, we are presented with other meaningful places embedded in the local dimension, including the Oceanus fish factory (where a group of women from the mining community work), a bus wrecking yard, and the derelict Palace Cinema in Knottingley. After a row with his father, who flings the pages of his *Prometheus* schoolbook into the fire ("Yer bloody fire-giver's gone up t'flue"¹⁴), the boy runs away from home. Once he reaches the bus wrecking yard, he enters the cab of an abandoned bus and pretends to 'drive' it. The Old Man, who – in the meantime – has joined his grandson, tries to make the boy understand that his father's behaviour is caused by the loss of his job at the pit:

BOY

He chucked my schoolbook into t'fire an all!

OLD MAN

He's lost his job, love! He feels small.¹⁵

In this desolated space, two seemingly distant generations meet, strengthening the male bond between the members of the family microcosm. Their tender complicity is evident when the man says goodbye to his grandson, just before going to the derelict cinema site. The old miner asks the boy not to tell his wife where he is and promises that he will keep the secret as well. This gives us a sense of the conventional gender divisions and roles within this kind of patriarchal family: if the male members hang around, their female counterparts are traditionally supposed to stay at home (at least in the opinion of the older members of the mining community):

¹³ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 17.

OLD MAN

By 'eck, lad, this bus is bloody slow.
At this rate I'll be missing t' picture show.
I'll walk there under mi own steam.
Stay in your broken bus and dream.

BOY

Tha can talk, grandad. Tha's never seen
a single picture on that Palace screen.
It closed down forty year ago.

OLD MAN

I'm off, or else I'll miss mi show.
Don't tell thi grandma where I am.
And I'll not tell on thee. She's mad, thi mam.
I'll not let on that tha's been skiving.
Or that tha's got no licence and tha's driving.

BOY and OLD MAN *make a silent agreement to connive.*¹⁶

Even if the boy remains in this abandoned area until the end of the film/poem, he dreams of leaving his *roots* behind to take new *routes* ("And, me, I'm off to Greece"¹⁷). Tired of 'driving' the bus, he enters a wrecked fire-engine, pulls the lever of a cracked bell on the roof, which starts tolling, and imitates the fire siren. This recurring image/sound will become a sort of refrain during the filmic journey of Prometheus around the landscapes of Europe. The Old Man, instead, walks to the cinema, passing through various gloomy locations "*dominated by the cooling towers*"¹⁸ threateningly looming over him. He sits in one of the few seats left in the abandoned building, where he stays in the dark, smoking one cigarette after another while watching a 'film within the film'. The sequence of powerful images projected onto the screen are indeed those we are simultaneously seeing, commented by Hermes, the caustic 'spin doctor' of Zeus. In the darkness of this beloved place, which becomes an intimate space for him, the retired coal miner is faced with the film of his own (Promethean) life until he significantly dies in a fire caused by one of his flung cigarettes.

¹⁶ Harrison, *Prometheus*, pp. 23-24.

¹⁷ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 24.

¹⁸ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 25.

However, the author crosses the spatial (and cultural) boundaries of Yorkshire throughout the film, opting for a non-linear kind of narrative, divided into different but intermingling threads, and oscillating between England and (post)industrial Europe, microcosm and macrocosm, personal and communal stories. The redundant miners are captured and their bodies brutally melted down in a German foundry in order to build a golden giant statue of Prometheus. The metamorphosis “of substance and form that the workers undergo”, Michelakis suggests, “is cast in terms of the labour process within the capitalist mode of production – its coercive and alienating nature and the capital’s self-valorization”.¹⁹ This monumental version of the Titan travels on a truck driven by Hermes’s henchmen, Kratos (Force) and Bia (Violence), effectively described by Hall as “masked nuclear power workers, looming menacingly through the steam of cooling towers”.²⁰ Travelling across national borders, the statue “undertakes an alternative kind of grand tour through the industrial and military wastelands of Europe”²¹ (Germany, Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) on its way to the archeological site of Eleusis, the birthplace of Aeschylus. All these places, from Dresden to Copșa Mică (“once the most polluted town in Romania and maybe the world”²²), have been devastated by the Promethean fire enabling progress but, at the same time, causing destruction and human suffering.

Harrison’s reworking of the ancient tragedy is rich in visually striking images, such as those showing the metamorphosis of the group of Yorkshire women working at the Oceanus fish factory and depicting their own alternative journey back to Greece through the waters of Europe. These female workers are thus transformed into a

¹⁹ Michelakis, p. 167.

²⁰ Hall, p. 130.

²¹ Michelakis, p. 204.

²² Tony Harrison, “Fire & Poetry”, in *Prometheus*, pp. vii-xxix (p. xviii).

contemporary version of the Aeschylean chorus of Oceanus's daughters. They raft down the River Humber to follow the route of their husbands, who are about to be melted down in Germany:

HERMES

This choir's just Zeus's little quirk.
They handled scales so well at work.
What sport to squeeze these lumpen proles
into the choral corset of posh roles,
to warble a mournful little number
as they start drifting down the Humber,
just as their menfolk start their route
to death down a scrap metal chute,
and drift through Europe all the way
to Elefsina for my play [...]²³

Hall's description gives us a sense of the lyricism of this female chorus, conjuring up an image suffused with melancholy. In her words, the Oceanids wear

pale veils of fishnet (what else?) fluttering across sad, beautiful masks designed by Jocelyn Herbert. They float on a raft down the River Humber, in one of Britain's industrial heartlands, to Richard Blackford's atmospheric music, sounding forth from the Humber Bridge's suspension cables.²⁴

It might be argued that these watery shots showing the Daughters of Oceanus drifting down the river fluidly expand the permeability of the (inter)national boundaries of Harrison's film/poem.

After crossing the German border, the radiant statue of Prometheus arrives in Dresden, "city of destructive flame"²⁵ savagely bombed by the Allies during the firestorm of 13-14 February 1945 ("35,000 in two days / perished in the Dresden blaze"²⁶). Here, the golden giant is placed in the empty football stadium. This seemingly anonymous space becomes the stage for a moving ceremony. With his silver caduceus,

²³ Harrison, *Prometheus*, pp. 34-35.

²⁴ Hall, p. 130.

²⁵ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 41.

²⁶ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 42.

Zeus's ambassador evokes the ghosts of the dead, who start whispering all the names of the war victims:

HERMES

Now to summon up the choir
of thousands perished in the fire.²⁷

Three German boys join this “*anti-Promethean CHORUS*”²⁸ conducted by Hermes. As it “*reaches a climax*”,²⁹ a shot from a helicopter (representing the omnipotent eye of Zeus) shows the golden statue, alone, standing in the middle of the stadium. From this aerial perspective, the giant Titan effectively loses his grandeur by gradually becoming “*smaller and smaller*”.³⁰

Harrison's transmigration of classical referents is interspersed with many other powerful images of significant places/spaces across Eastern and Western Europe. Particularly relevant to this textual and visual journey is the emblematic character of the Boy's Mam, a contemporary version of the Aeschylean Io, “whose frenzied wandering”, as the theatre scholar Hallie Rebecca Marshall puts it, “is a central strand of the film's narrative”.³¹ When her son leaves home because of the quarrel with his father, the miner's wife runs out of the house and starts looking for him in every corner. After wandering through Yorkshire, Mam/IO crosses various European borders in order to escape Kratos and Bia, who are chasing her. However, her troubled journey ends in a Bulgarian abattoir, where she is slaughtered like a Friesian cow and subsequently cremated in a cattle-burning place. Following her path, we visit the Gothic Church in Most, Czech Republic, where she hides and finds some inner peace; then we leap with

²⁷ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 46.

²⁸ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 48.

²⁹ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 48.

³⁰ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 49.

³¹ Hallie Rebecca Marshall, “Mythic Women in Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*”, in *Ancient Greek Women in Film*, ed. by Konstantinos P. Nikoloutsos (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 235-51 (p. 243).

her on a tram and reach the derelict foyer of the Palace Hotel in Ústí Nad Labem, where she lights a (Promethean) fire and falls asleep. Later in the film/poem, we see her finding a seat on a Romanian train, looking for hospitality in a gypsy village, entering a monastery and silently begging for some bread in a Bulgarian bakery, just before being brutally killed. At the same time, the images featuring the character of Hermes and the statue of Prometheus provide us with alternative – but intersecting – routes which transgress national borders and pass through visually and emotionally evocative places such as a crematorium oven in Auschwitz, the entrance of Birkenau, the industrial complex of Nowa Huta, and a derelict Romanian carbon factory in Copșa Mică.

Before concluding this section, it is worth considering the final sequence of the film/poem, in which Harrison opts for a physical and metaphorical relocation of the statue of the Titan, which significantly comes back to its Greek origins. The giant Prometheus is indeed transported to the ancient site of Eleusis:

HERMES

There's one bastard passing by
to end up being chained on high,
so that the world can come to mock
Goldenballs chained to the rock,
helpless, hopeless, heaped with scorn,
here, where Aeschylus was born,
the other bastard (maybe worse!)
who hymned Prometheus in his verse.³²

The statue of the philanthropic fire-bringer, whose golden surface shines under the Mediterranean sun, is chained to a majestic rock. However, as Hermes states, in this late twentieth-century refiguration of the myth, Prometheus is not condemned to be eaten by a voracious eagle for eternity. Rather, he is punished for giving fire to mankind

³² Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 80.

by facing the catastrophic consequences of the technological progress that his Promethan flame has brought:

HERMES

[...]

We need no eagle now to gnaw
when conscience can consume him [Prometheus] more.

More rending than the eagle's beak are
Dresden, Auschwitz, Coșța Mică.

He'll have to brood there on his rock
on fire and *Feuer, Pozhar, Foc*,
fire that poisons and pollutes

[...] ³³

The impact of pollution becomes evident in this (seemingly uncontaminated) rocky landscape: a pool of petrol leaves a smear on Hermes's silver boots, just before Zeus's ambassador himself turns into a statue. In this closing sequence, the space of the Palace Cinema, where the old miner is watching the Prometheus film, overlap with Eleusis. When the Old Man triumphantly flicks his half-smoked cigarette into the petrol pool projected onto the screen, the fuel "*ignites with a great roar*"³⁴ and burns the silver statue of Hermes:

OLD MAN

[...]

He's stood in t' petrol and my hand
's holding t' lit Promethean brand
and if them boundaries don't exist
one flick of this arthritic wrist

'll mek that servile silver wet
sizzle with this cigarette!

I commit you, Hermes, in the name
of Prometheus to the power of flame.³⁵

The Old Man's face is initially flushed with excitement and pride, but he soon realises that the fire is spreading to the chorus of the Daughters of Oceanus and to the rock to which the statue of Prometheus is bound. At the end of this provocative appropriation of

³³ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 82.

³⁴ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 84.

³⁵ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 84.

Aeschylus's tragedy, everything goes up in flames, the statues are entirely consumed and the only remnant is the right fist of the Titan, which is obviously highly symbolical and laden with leftist political overtones. Simultaneously, the derelict cinema in Knottingley burns down and the old miner dies. Harrison thus draws another close parallel between the conflagration of the spatial boundaries of the classical myth and those of its twentieth-century demystification.

In Harrison's radical reworking, the British Prometheus is unbound, both physically and metaphorically. Even if the Old Man, the contemporary working-class version of the Titan, is rooted in his local context and never leaves Yorkshire, the cinematic journey of the golden Promethean statue – transported across Europe – starkly contrasts with the immobility of Aeschylus's immortal protagonist, who remains chained to a Scythian rock. Significantly, Harrison's adaptation was originally conceived for the stage, more precisely for an outdoor performance, as the author himself stated: "In fact, many years ago, I had wanted to stage the original play of Aeschylus in Yorkshire, as one of what have been called my *kamikaze* performances, on a Caucasus of coalslack on some colliery spoil heap close to a power station".³⁶ This shows how the medial transplantation of Harrison's rewriting has overcome its initial spatial (and cultural) constraints, entirely in keeping with the idea of crossing and blurring borders that is a distinctive aspect of many films adapting classical tragedies. The ongoing interplay between roots and routes, anglicisation and foreignisation, geographical specificity and liminality pervades Harrison's *Prometheus*: in most of the cinematic transpositions of Greek tragedies, "[e]ven spaces that initially appear to be readily available for contemplation or domestication, for discovery or conquest, turn out

³⁶ Harrison, "Fire & Poetry", p. xxii.

to be haunted by memories and desires, scarred by violence, defying interpretation and control”.³⁷ Harrison’s version thus succeeds in showing how filmic spaces can become “transitional”³⁸ and, in a sense, transnational *loci*, in which time and timelessness, history, and myth intriguingly converge.

2. LANGUAGE: THE POLITICS OF REWRITING

As we have seen in the fourth chapter *Between Theory and Practice*, when approaching classical sources, many British writers are faced with a considerable linguistic challenge. Harrison’s case can be considered the exception rather than the rule. Holding a BA degree in Classics from the University of Leeds,³⁹ the Yorkshire author is fascinated by ancient literatures – in particular Greek tragedy –⁴⁰ and demonstrates a sound knowledge of classical languages. If, on the one hand, he is rooted in (and fiercely proud of) his Northern origins, on the other, Harrison is a polyglot and truly cosmopolitan poet. In the words of Eyre: “Multilingual (Greek, ancient and modern, Latin, Italian, French, Czech, and Hausa), much travelled – a citizen, as they say, of the world, living, often rather precariously, between London, Florida, Greece, and Newcastle. An expert in many cultures, with a curiosity about many others”.⁴¹

It might be said that (the politics of) language is the pivot on which Harrison’s poetry revolves. Indeed, he is deeply interested in the social stratification of “class-torn

³⁷ Michelakis, p. 215.

³⁸ Michelakis, p. 215.

³⁹ In 1958 Harrison began a PhD, that he never completed.

⁴⁰ Byrne defines Greek literature as “an ever-renewing source for Harrison, providing not only material for translation/adaptation, narrative frameworks, and formal models, but also precepts for life”. Sandie Byrne, “Introduction: Tony Harrison’s Public Poetry”, in *Tony Harrison: Loiner*, pp. 1-27 (p. 6).

⁴¹ Eyre, p. 44.

Britain”,⁴² and in his work language shapes and determines characters and communal hierarchies. This is perfectly exemplified by the socio-linguistic gulf screened in *Prometheus*: while the eloquent Hermes, interpreted by Michael Feast, exhibits a cut-glass accent of Southern England, chooses snobbish words, even quotes from ancient Greek and reads modern foreign languages –

HERMES

[...]

I do hope you don't mind if I gloss
such foreign words we come across,
I hate to flaunt my language skill,
and wouldn't have to, if yours weren't nil!,⁴³

the redundant miners “speak in a broad Yorkshire dialect, replete with glottal stops, reductions of ‘the’ to ‘t’, and unaspirated ‘h’s among other features”,⁴⁴ as Marshall suggests.

In *Prometheus*, Harrison also highlights the stark differences between male and female voices. As some commentators have pointed out,⁴⁵ he clearly gives men and masculinity prominence: the dialogues among male characters take centre stage, whereas the main female figures (Mam, Grandma, and the twelve Daughters of Ocean) are almost voiceless throughout the film/poem. Notably, Marshall stresses how this choice can be connected with the patriarchal structure and socio-cultural peculiarities of the mining communities across the UK (and Eastern Europe). During the Thatcher era, in these grim contexts women were mainly relegated to domestic roles and, at the same time, had to cope with their husbands’ uncertainty, anxiety, and frustration caused by

⁴² Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 56.

⁴³ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 75.

⁴⁴ Hallie Rebecca Marshall, “Saxon Violence and Social Decay in Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* and Tony Harrison’s *Prometheus*”, *Helios*, 38 (2011), pp. 165-79 (p. 170).

⁴⁵ See Steve Woodward, “Voices in the Past and in the Present: Tony Harrison’s Reworking of the Prometheus Myth” (available at: <http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/Colq99/woodward99.html>, last accessed 30 October 2015), pages unnumbered, and Marshall, “Mythic Women in Tony Harrison’s *Prometheus*”.

the closure of local pits and the subsequent loss of their jobs. However, Harrison's focus on the male figures does not aim to diminish their female counterparts. On the contrary, it seems to emphasise their silent suffering and remarkable resilience:

This narrative, like life in these communities, centres on the male characters, son, father, grandfather, but Harrison also tells an equally compelling narrative of the suffering of women in these communities by mapping their narratives onto the female roles in Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*: the chorus of Nereids and Io.⁴⁶

Even if these female figures have no distinctive voices, it can be argued that, in Harrison's filmic rewriting, women are given a strong visual presence. As discussed above, the images featuring the chorus of the Oceanids are indeed extremely powerful. Initially, the twelve women riding on a bus to the Oceanus factory speak to one another, but the audience cannot hear what they are saying, thus we tend to identify them merely as a group of faceless workers. Significantly, while each miner is given his own voice, their wives are defined by their choral function. When they enter the fish factory, they become even more anonymous, as Woodward suggests: "[...] they don garments that dehumanise them to the extent of covering their hair and bodies in identical blue uniforms".⁴⁷ After their metamorphosis into (post)classical creatures, the Oceanids/Nereids wear stylised masks and their unison vocal expression exclusively consists of unscripted melodies, whereas in the Greek hypotext the Daughters of Ocean constantly support and console the Titan.

Even more interestingly, a central character such as the Boy's Mam speaks only a few words at the beginning of the verse-film ("Jack, come back. He didn't mean it. He's upset, your Dad")⁴⁸ and whispers "*Nein*"⁴⁹ in German while she is sleeping in the

⁴⁶ Marshall, "Mythic Women in Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*", p. 242.

⁴⁷ Woodward, page unnumbered.

⁴⁸ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 59 [original emphasis].

derelict Palace Hotel in the Czech Republic. However, her lack of eloquence does not mean that she is inexpressive: Fern Smith, the athletic actress playing her role, is a mistress of non-verbal language, conveying her feelings through intense bodily gestures, especially when she keeps running away and, even more evidently, when she is captured, transformed into an animal, transported in a cattle-track to the abattoir and slaughtered like a cow.⁵⁰ Again, Harrison's choice is opposed to Aeschylus's: the Greek Io, who visits the chained Prometheus, is a positive and talkative figure, with an enquiring attitude. After narrating her endless wanderings and expressing her distress through words, Aeschylus's Io – who has been transformed into a heifer – forms an emotional bond with the suffering Titan, whom she asks to predict her future. Prometheus gives her hope by saying that, after wandering for many years, one of her descendants will set him free.

We might reasonably assume that Harrison's silencing of the female characters is connected with the emotional and physical abuse suffered by women in twentieth-century society. Arguably, his film/poem aims to bear witness to the silenced condition of the marginalised by emphasising the inherent limitations of their unvoiced social positions. In this respect, Hardwick suggests another insightful interpretation related to the specificities of cinema itself, a unique medium which has the capacity to provide the speechless characters with a 'voice' of their own through the striking images projected onto the screen: "It could also follow from the power of the medium – film can give a 'voice' to the silenced without the necessity for them to speak".⁵¹

Although Harrison silences the female characters in order to screen their narratives by making them speak through their abused and dehumanised bodies, women

⁵⁰ "Again no words are spoken, but through her brindled appearance and movements the female actor conveys the terror of captivity". Woodward, page unnumbered.

⁵¹ Lorna Hardwick, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures* (London: Duckworth, 2000), p. 134.

are not the only minority to which he wants to give due prominence. With all their blatant masculinity, the Yorkshire miners also belong to the category of ‘the dispossessed’. If, on the one hand, linguistic discrepancies and accent variations emphasise class stratification in Britain, on the other hand, at least in one sequence of *Prometheus*, prosody seems to be a democratic weapon. Indeed, although Hermes assumes that only Olympian gods have the right to speak in poetic form –

Poetry of this posh sort’ll
never come from a mere mortal.
It’s quite beyond mere mortal reach,
this pure Olympian form of speech.
It’s a pure Olympian privilege
forbidden folk from Ferrybridge⁵² –,

even the unnamed coalminers about to be slaughtered surprisingly start using verse:

MINER 1

Have you noticed summat?

MINER 2

What?

MINER

Every time
we make a sentence it ends up wi’ a rhyme!⁵³

Used to speaking exclusively the “local lingo[.]”,⁵⁴ the mineworkers feel uncomfortable with Shakespearean rhythm:

MINER 1

[...]

I don’t like it. It’s more than bloody queer
spouting bloody poetry like King Lear.⁵⁵

In spite of the initial reluctance and embarrassment, however, their clumsy appropriation of poetry is revealing about Harrison’s anti-elitist approach.

In this respect, Hall has shrewdly observed that “Harrison’s scholarship never stands between him and the real people with whom he is dealing. His classical heroes

⁵² Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 21.

⁵³ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 36.

⁵⁴ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 37.

never overshadow his local heroes”.⁵⁶ This observation perfectly applies to his representation of the Yorkshire working-class community, and – in particular – of the sick Old Man who delivers a nostalgic 100-line monologue on the pleasure of smoking in cinemas.⁵⁷ For this twentieth-century counterpart of Prometheus, the cinema was once a glamorous place, whose power of seduction was linked to “the erotic connotations of smoking in the movies of classical Hollywood”.⁵⁸ Hall also stresses the link between the act of smoking cigarettes and class consciousness: “[t]o smoke is a sign of working-class identity and even solidarity (smoking is very much a class issue in the UK), and the ultimate sign of the personal liberty which the Old Man refuses to yield to his capitalist masters”.⁵⁹ As we have seen, this metatheatrical, or – more precisely – metafilmic sequence, shot in the darkness of an abandoned cinema in Knottingley, is extremely powerful: Walter Sparrow’s ex-miner is confronted by his antagonist Hermes, who appears on the screen and presents the “smoke-demolished Socialist”⁶⁰ and the audience with the images of the statue’s journey across Europe. Harrison pointed out in his preface *Fire & Poetry* that one of the reasons behind this kind of remediation is precisely

the way the size of the cinema screen can give heroic stature to the most humble of faces, and this became an essential requirement in a film where the most unlikely wheezing ex-miner is slowly made to represent Prometheus himself. Men projected onto large screens could become Titans or gods.⁶¹

⁵⁶ Hall, p. 132.

⁵⁷ See Harrison, *Prometheus*, pp. 27-29.

⁵⁸ Kenneth MacKinnon, “Film Adaptation and the Myth of Textual Fidelity” (available at: <http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/Colq99/mackinnon99.html>, last accessed 31 October 2015), page unnumbered.

⁵⁹ Hall, p. 131.

⁶⁰ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 56.

⁶¹ Harrison, “Fire & Poetry”, p. xxii.

3. GENRE: THE POLITICS OF REMEDIATION

Since this dissertation mainly focuses on dramatic/theatrical rewritings of ancient tragedies on the contemporary British stage, examining a film/poem may at first seem a curious choice. However, I have decided to include Harrison's *Prometheus* for two reasons. First, this radical rewriting is an extreme example of 'genre cross-over', a practice stressing the subtle interdependence between different literary/artistic forms, perfectly in line with the generic hybridisation which is so common in today's appropriations of the tragic form. At the same time, Harrison's remediation highlights the enormous potential and permeability of this ancient narrative, which has been reworked in various media over the twentieth century.⁶² Secondly, but not less importantly, as we have seen, Harrison's provocative reworking of the Promethean narrative had theatrical origins: as Michael Kustow points out in his *Guardian* article "Burning Ambition" (1999), this contemporary appropriation was initially intended to be staged in a Yorkshire coalfield: "Ferrybridge was his site, with its coal mountains and cooling towers. The slag would become the Caucasus to which Prometheus would be chained".⁶³ Therefore, it is particularly interesting to examine how a British poet with a classical background, author of various translations and theatrical adaptations of ancient sources, transmigrates the myth of the Titan to the screen through verse.⁶⁴

⁶² See Hardwick, *Translating Words, Translating Cultures*, pp. 128-9. The reception scholar provides the reader with some interesting examples of Promethean remediation, which, in her words, "demonstrate the versatility and plasticity of the myth across a range of media and also point to the way in which transmission (including subject matter, style and content) involves various kinds of intratextual and intertextual relationships" (p. 129).

⁶³ Quoted in Marshall, "Saxon Violence and Social Decay", p. 166.

⁶⁴ See the chapter entitled "Translations, Adaptations and Theatre Work" in Luke Spencer's study *The Poetry of Tony Harrison* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), pp. 43-66.

Being convinced that “film and poetry have a great deal in common”,⁶⁵ Harrison is probably the main exponent – if not the inventor – of a distinctive genre. This “early and avid film devotee”,⁶⁶ as he defines himself, affirms that *Prometheus* allows his theatrical and cinematic experiences to converge through the co-mingling of poetry and childhood memories: “It became a cinema venture because of a feeling I had that my poetic reveries in front of our living room coal-fire and my earliest experiences of films were connected”.⁶⁷

This hybrid genre, as the scholar Peter Robinson suggests, is entirely in keeping with Harrison’s

quest for a public poetry, particularly the way in which he is concerned with reinstating an oral sense in order to draw the audience in and facilitate their engagement. In fact, by making these classical elements accessible he is inviting a wider participation in those aspects that previously had been cordoned off in a preserve of high culture.⁶⁸

Notably, this kind of public poetry is characterised by what Harrison defines “a sense of shared intimacy amongst the viewers sat at home on their settees in their twos and threes”,⁶⁹ connecting the private and the public spheres, fostering a sense of empathy in the audience, and creating emotional bonds within a community. By using demotic expressions, rhymes, and reiterations, Harrison aims to make the classics, and literature in general, immediate and accessible to those without a traditional education, demystifying the canon and denying any elitist form of cultural appropriation, a kind of approach which is in line with the public nature of the filmic medium. As we have seen,

⁶⁵ Harrison, “Fire & Poetry”, p. xxiii.

⁶⁶ Tony Harrison, “Flicks and This Fleeting Life”, in Tony Harrison, *Collected Film Poetry*, with introduction by Tony Harrison and Peter Symes (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), pp. vii-xxx (p. vii).

⁶⁷ Harrison, “Fire & Poetry”, p. xxii.

⁶⁸ See Peter Robinson, *Facing Up to the Unbearable: The Mythical Method in Tony Harrison's Film/poems* (available at: <http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/Colq99/robinson99.htm>, last accessed 3 November 2015), pages unnumbered.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Robinson, page unnumbered.

Harrison's deep indebtedness to the ancients never constitutes an obstacle preventing the readers/viewers from emotionally interacting with his visionary exploration of human suffering. Rather, poetry becomes an egalitarian weapon – a democratic view that Zeus's spin-doctor ironically does not seem to share:

VOICE OF HERMES

Constant theft! First fire, now this –
pinching poetic artifice!
How can Olympus stay intact
if *poetry* comes to *Pontefract*?⁷⁰

Moreover, Harrison was completely dissatisfied with the way his poetry was often juxtaposed with unsuitable images on TV.⁷¹ Nonetheless, after some inaccurate and clumsy TV renditions of his poems, Harrison started to appreciate the intimate connection between what is written and what can be shown, between orality and visuality: “I began to see that there was a close correspondence between the way rhythm unfolded in film and rhythm unfolded in strict verse metrical systems that I use in poetry”.⁷² The editing process is thus crucial to his work, in which images and words are carefully matched: the poet works closely with the film/video editor at the association between sound and visual sequences.

Harrison's personal involvement in this procedure contrasts with the method of his precursor, W. H. Auden, who was plausibly the first author to compose verse for a

⁷⁰ Harrison, *Prometheus*, p. 23 [original emphasis].

⁷¹ “My hesitations about the creative co-existence of poetry and film were deepened when my first book of poems *The Loiners* won the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize in 1972 and because of that was given some minutes on a TV arts programme. I read some poems on camera and someone went out and shot some images to go with the reading that were so clumsily and clunkily cut into the text that I had to switch the programme off. It was as if the ‘director’ had only read the nouns in the poems and decided that we wouldn’t understand them without a show-and-tell picture. Over thirty years later that kind of clumsy illustration can still be seen accompanying poetry. It is everything a film/poem shouldn’t be. That experience made me wary of entrusting poems not specifically written for it to TV until Richard Eyre directed my reading of my long poem *v.* in 1987 for Channel 4, with a great sensitivity to the poetic text”. Harrison, “Flicks and This Fleeting Life”, pp. xi-xii.

⁷² “Tony Harrison – Film Poetry”, Channel Four Film Night Programme, presented by Janice Forsyth (available at: http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xfddjm_tony-harrison-film-poetry_creation, last accessed 3 November 2015).

screen documentary. It is interesting to note that Auden's *Night Mail* (1936), which traces the journey of the mail train from London to Scotland and juxtaposes the poet's words with Benjamin Britten's music, was revisited by Harrison himself in his 2002 film/poem *Crossing*, first broadcast on ITV's *The South Bank Show*. One of the main differences between *Night Mail* and its contemporary rewriting, as Hall observes, is precisely the fact that Harrison composed poetry during the recording and editing phases, while Auden wrote verse "to accompany pre-existing footage".⁷³ For the Anglo-American poet, traditional metrical structures were not suitable for movies because of the difficulty in combining audio-visual materials. Therefore, he wrote verse only after the film was edited: "The generally accepted metrical forms cannot be used in films, owing to the difficulty of cutting the film exactly according to the beat without distorting the visual content".⁷⁴ By contrast, in his introduction to *Prometheus*, Harrison states that in his own film/poems he has opted for the quatrain of Gray's *Elegy* and Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, along with octosyllabic couplets. As he points out, it is important to remember that Auden worked in the Thirties, "before the video machine made it possible to have frame-accurate time code and easily re-played sequences. And perhaps the new digital editing has made it possible to experiment much more with the relations between poetry and film".⁷⁵ Despite the obvious technological limitations which were still present in that period, this early pioneer was eager to experiment with crossover and excited about the possibilities offered by the encounter between cinema and poetry:

[Auden] seems to have been willing to apprentice himself to all the processes, with a view to doing what I, in fact, have ended up doing in my own film/poems – being there as a constant presence during the shoot with a very sympathetic

⁷³ Hall, p. 135.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Harrison, "Fire & Poetry", p. xxiv.

⁷⁵ Harrison, "Fire & Poetry", p. xxiv.

colleague like Peter Symes, and then, following the logic of the organic process developed during our collaborations, directing the films myself.⁷⁶

Besides Auden, Harrison mentions some other twentieth-century figures who experimented with cinema and verse, such as the British documentary film-maker Humphrey Jennings, “also a poet both on the page and in his cinematic practice”⁷⁷, the Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein, whose *Alexander Nevsky* drew upon John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost*, and the Italian Pier Paolo Pasolini, “a poet before he was a film director”,⁷⁸ who distinguished the cinema of prose from the cinema of poetry.⁷⁹

If, on the one hand, Harrison throws light on the special affinities between the language of film and poetry, between images and words, on the other hand, he is equally aware of the differences between the cinematic medium and its theatrical counterpart. Harrison has always considered the ‘realism’ of the vivid images projected onto the screen more emotionally involving than the ‘fictionality’ of the actions enacted on the stage.⁸⁰ Despite his abiding love for the theatre, the idea of sharing the live space with ‘real’ actors embodying the *dramatis personae* in the presence of an audience can be rather exclusive for Harrison, who feels like a detached observer of dramatised action. In his personal experience, a theatrical performance, with its *hic et nunc* dimension and what Samuel Taylor Coleridge termed ‘the willing suspension of

⁷⁶ Harrison, “Fire & Poetry”, p. xxv.

⁷⁷ Harrison, “Fire & Poetry”, p. xxv.

⁷⁸ Harrison, “Fire & Poetry”, p. xxv.

⁷⁹ Harrison points out that the first attempt to draw a distinction between these two kinds of cinematic constructions was by the Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, in his 1927 “Poetry and Prose in the Cinema”.

⁸⁰ “When I first saw a play in a proscenium theatre like the old Theatre Royal in Leeds, with actors only addressing each other and pouring drinks and smoking cigarettes, I felt bored and excluded. But I could enter into the realism of cinema because it was not a live exchange. The actors didn’t know I was there. I grew up loving both cinema and theatre, but because I’ve felt so conscious of how different they really are, I have always hated any video recording of my theatrical works, and when I have deliberately embraced the ancient ephemerality of the one performance of a theatre piece, as with *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* in the stadium of Delphi or *The Kaisers of Carnuntum* in the Roman amphitheatre of Petronell-Carnuntum, I have forbidden any filming of it”. Harrison, “Flicks and This Fleeting Life”, p. ix.

disbelief’, is a more artificial and less participatory process than the filmic rendition of ‘real’ suffering onto a large screen, a medium which has the capacity to give increased prominence and realism to an image.⁸¹

In his cinematic transposition of a dramatic hypotext, Harrison fully explores the inherent potentialities of film and its fruitful encounter with verse narratives. His unique and elaborate combination of images and words, as well as his use of music and colours ranging from the achromatic greyness of coal mines to the shininess of the Prometheus statue, vividly transfer the classical source to a twentieth-century medium. Harrison’s dynamic, creative, and multi-layered process of genre hybridisation thus offers contemporary audiences an exciting form of ‘translational’ metamorphosis of the Promethean myth, demystified through the cross-pollination of (poetic) words and (cine-dramatic) images.

4. THE PROMETHEAN POLITICS OF TONY HARRISON

Not surprisingly, the story of the mythological Titan who brought the fire of progress to mankind has inspired a wide array of (more or less political) adaptations across the centuries. This powerful figure resisting any form of tyranny traditionally spans different generations and media, while maintaining his iconic status through the ages. In the words of the Romantic scholar Stuart Curran, the extraordinariness of this

⁸¹ “It was there [in a small cinema, the News Theatre (Leeds)] just after the Second World War ended that I saw the newsreel footage of the Nazi concentration camps. I don’t remember who took me [...] but there was something overwhelming in seeing such terrible images on a large screen, much bigger than life size. I think my reaction was almost on the scale of those early viewers of the Lumière Brothers’ film of the train arriving in a station in 1895. It wasn’t that I tried to escape from the heaped corpses moving towards me, but I felt that the jumbling cascade of bulldozed emaciated Belsen bodies were being dumped on the Art Deco carpet of the cinema and into my consciousness for ever. It almost blighted my life, it had such a powerful effect on me [...]. I have never forgotten that introduction to the filming of real life or, in this case, real and terrifying death”. Harrison, “Flicks and This Fleeting Life”, pp. ix-x.

emblematic character resides precisely in its malleability and capacity to become a universal symbol: “Prometheus always stands for something else – character, principle, idea – never for himself”.⁸² Specifically, as Harrison himself suggests, the transhistorical and Protean quality of the protagonist of this mythical narrative largely depends on the extended temporal boundaries of the Aeschylean tragedy and on the amount of endless suffering staged in this ancient drama:

No play in the ancient repertoire works over a longer time scale than *Prometheus Bound*. Or deals with more unbroken suffering. Its span is not, as in the *Oresteia*, the ten fateful years of the Trojan War, but thirty millennia: thirty millennia of tyrannical torture, thirty millennia of defiance. And so it is not surprising that at times of the collapse of ideas that might have created liberty and equality the figure of the chained Titan, Prometheus, is remembered. Nor is it surprising that for those who dramatise history as dialectical struggle Prometheus has come to embody the tyrannically restrained champion of the downtrodden and oppressed. When men feel themselves in chains the myth of the Titan re-enters history.⁸³

Tony Harrison’s 1998 reworking of the ancient myth inscribes itself into this multi-faceted literary and artistic tradition, as the poet himself points out in his preface – whose initial draft was produced in the Baths of Caracalla, Rome, where Percy Bysshe Shelley composed his own passionate *Prometheus Unbound* at the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century. At the same time, Harrison’s version offers an extremely personal re-interpretation and de-mystification of Greek tragedy, by re-mythologising the Promethean tale for a wider public and stressing the inherent everyday quality of the classics. Robinson tellingly defines the eclectic British author as “an oral storyteller incorporating, adapting and re-presenting inherited traditions (the classical forms/myths), making up and telling stories (the films) to people who have no written literature, (who don’t read poetry)”.⁸⁴ In a unique way, this film-poet relocates,

⁸² Stuart Curran, “The Political Prometheus”, *Studies in Romanticism*, 25 (1986), pp. 429-55 (p. 429).

⁸³ Harrison, “Fire & Poetry”, p. viii.

⁸⁴ See Robinson, page unnumbered.

rewrites and remediates the philanthropic Titan's myth, showing how classical referents can be invaluable sources for current reflections on twentieth-century Britain and Europe. Aeschylus's play thus becomes a template for a new hybrid artefact, which both quotes and deconstructs its main hypotext by domesticating and, at the same time, defamiliarising it. As Michelakis suggests, Harrison's film/poem investigates contemporaneity by (re)placing the ancient Greek source

within specific histories of the present not only to authenticate these histories but also to reveal their complexities, limitations, and aporias. Greek tragedy returns in cinema not as a past relic to be revered or protected but as a figurative device working within narrative understandings of history.⁸⁵

However, Aeschylus's tragedy is not the only source of this provocative artwork, which is palimpsestic and multi-layered. Harrison's twentieth-century reception of the myth is indeed filtered through the various Romantic, and subsequently Marxist, reverberations of Promethean politics. In his Preface to the published screenplay of his film/poem, as Hall observes, Harrison himself stresses the affinities between his work and his precursors' re-enactments and re-figurations of the Titan's myth:

It [the film/poem] is a late twentieth-century antiphonal response to Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, with all its choric plurality of voices, its frustrated revolutionary power, and its sense of the torment implicit in the march of human history.[...] But he [Harrison] also points out the important relationship between the Prometheus myth and the history of Marxist politics, and some of the film feels like a rhapsody on ideas developed in the classics of Marxist theory.⁸⁶

As said above, Harrison significantly sketches his preface in an archeological site, the Roman Baths of Caracalla, that Shelley "chose as his alfresco study in which to write his play [*Prometheus Unbound*]"⁸⁷ 180 years previously. For Harrison, who contemplates the landscape with a copy of Shelley's lyrical drama in his pocket, this place – exceptionally rich in classical echoes – provides a stimulating environment to

⁸⁵ Michelakis, p. 169.

⁸⁶ Hall, p. 131-2.

⁸⁷ Harrison, "Fire & Poetry", p. ix.

reflect on how political power is inevitably precarious and corrupted by time. The abandoned ruins surrounding Harrison are a reminder of the fact that even the mightiest empires are destined to fall:

The ruins of the ideals of the French Revolution turned Shelley to the myth, and the famous posthumous painting by Joseph Severn, now in the Keats-Shelley House in Rome, shows him working on his *Prometheus Unbound* in 1818/19 in the ruins of the Baths of Caracalla. Such ruins revealed to Shelley the proof that even the greatest of powers come to an end, a suitable ambience in which to compose his *Prometheus Unbound*. And the Baths of Caracalla is still an appropriate place in which to contemplate the ruins of time and the collapse of empire [...].⁸⁸

Totally immersing himself in the evocativeness of this archeological site, Harrison adopts and adapts an intermediate nineteenth-century source which was in turn inspired by this place, intermingling Romantic political overtones with the brutality of post-Holocaust history and its catastrophic effects on personal and communal stories.

Not surprisingly, many Romantic poets were deeply fascinated by the mythological figure of the Titan, a philanthropic giant bound to a Caucasian rock by the despotic Zeus and universally adopted as a symbol of the fierce struggle for freedom against tyrannical power. In 1816, Lord Byron paid tribute to Prometheus in his eponymous poem, while Mary Shelley's best-known novel *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* was published in early 1818. However, the greatest master of the Promethean art and politics was undoubtedly her husband, variously defined by critics as "a nonviolent moral reformer, a political revolutionary, an anarchist, a socialist, a democrat, and so on".⁸⁹ P. B. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, with its title clearly evoking an image of freedom from the chains of oppression, was composed between September 1818 and December 1819, and not published until August 1820. Even if it is

⁸⁸ Harrison, "Fire & Poetry", p. ix.

⁸⁹ Harry White, "Relative Means and Ends in Shelley's Social-Political Thought", *Studies in English Literature*, 22 (1982), pp. 613-31 (p. 613).

considered “Shelley’s most ambitious and experimental work”,⁹⁰ *Prometheus Unbound* sold just a few copies and was never performed or even considered a play. Like other dramatic texts written by his fellow Romantic poets, this piece of work is often discarded as “untheatrical and unplayable”.⁹¹ Moreover, Shelley’s visionary lyrical drama, and his poetry at large, might seem obscure because “its vision of transforming human social existence is inseparable from its radical philosophical idealism and stylistic experimentalism”.⁹²

Despite its complexity and hostile reception, *Prometheus Unbound* offers one of the most radical reinterpretations of the mythological figure which has inspired various generations of writers, artists, and revolutionaries throughout the ages. In his *Red Shelley*, Paul Foot argues that there is a close connection between Shelley and his depiction of the fire-giver defying any kind of tyranny: in this nineteenth-century text, Prometheus is “more than just a rebel. He represents cultured, intellectual man; scientific man who has made discoveries which can change the world. He represents, in short, Shelley as he imagined himself. He is wise, kind, brave. But he is also a god, a Titan [...]”.⁹³ If the fire-giver seems to mirror the qualities of the Romantic poet, Shelley himself, in turn, assumes Promethean stature and later becomes a patron saint of socialism. Tellingly, Karl Marx is reported to have said that he regretted Shelley’s premature death at the age of twenty-nine because he was “a thorough revolutionary and would have remained in the van of socialism all his life”.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ William Keach, “The Political Poet”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley*, ed. by Timothy Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 123-42 (p. 123).

⁹¹ Harrison, “Fire & Poetry”, p. xiii.

⁹² Keach, p. 134.

⁹³ Paul Foot, *Red Shelley* (London: Bookmarks, 1984), p. 192.

⁹⁴ Franz Mehring, *Karl Marx, The Story of His Life* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1939), p. 504, quoted in Foot, p. 227.

This radical political background is entirely in keeping with Harrison's leftist roots. According to the Yorkshire poet, the (social) act of rewriting is inherently provocative: "He seems to be suggesting that translation and adaptation can provide allegories and satire which will slip through the net of official scrutiny, canonic policing, moral watchdogs, or other censors, whilst affording a rich sub-text to the acute audience"⁹⁵ especially in oppressed cultures, in which "the works of the past are continually read as if they were written yesterday".⁹⁶ Far from being a neutral and disengaged imitation of an ancient text, *Prometheus* perfectly exemplifies Harrison's way of conceiving socio-political commitment as a writer: his heteroglossic film/poem gives voice to the silenced, simultaneously rewriting 'capital-H' History and polyphonic (hi)stories. It offers a liminal site of struggle and divisions in which overlapping fe/male narratives show how the public and the personal level, hegemony and subjugation, despair and hope, oblivion and awareness both diverge and, in a sense, converge into a thought-provoking aesth/et(h)ical experience. As Byrne notes, "[a]lthough he refers to his poetry as political, he does not claim that it offers a radical perspective on the underlying determinants of social injustice, nor that it can change anything".⁹⁷ Harrison's witty lines perfectly juxtaposed with his provocative images never provide the audience with ready-made solutions, but are equally able to speak the unspeakable, bear the unbearable and, possibly, even redeem the unredeemable.

⁹⁵ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 160.

⁹⁶ Harrison quoted in Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 160.

⁹⁷ Byrne, *H, v. & O*, p. 162.

CASE STUDIES:

3. REFRAMING SOPHOCLES:

MARTIN CRIMP'S *CRUEL AND TENDER* (2004)

Like Sarah Kane and Tony Harrison, Martin Crimp (1956-) is a dramatist who is capable of merging his British *roots* with wider European *routes*. Tellingly, his multifaceted, elusive, and challenging dramatic output, aimed at exploring the deepening crisis of subjectivity in a late capitalist world, has long been regarded with suspicion in Britain and, at the same time, widely appreciated on the Continent. As Sierz states in the Introduction to his *The Theatre of Martin Crimp* (2006), the first study of one of Britain's most talented and neglected playwrights, "all over mainland Europe, from Berlin to Paris, from Milan to Lisbon and from Copenhagen to Ljubljana, his [Crimp's] name can be glimpsed on the billboards of the best theatres, yet, in his own country, most theatergoers have scarcely heard of him".¹ Despite his conspicuous success on the Continent (largely due to his heterogeneous influences and taste for formal experimentalism),² Crimp is well aware of the inherent Britishness of his work

¹ Aleks Sierz, *The Theatre of Martin Crimp*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013 [2006]), p. 1.

² "Crimp doesn't fit neatly into the theatre studies mould where you can list which playwright influenced which of his plays. With him, influence takes the form of osmosis. [...] you can occasionally detect the inflection of another playwright here or there, but otherwise his tone is original and personal. Often, he has been inspired by modern art rather than by naturalistic theatre, Marcel Duchamp rather than George Bernard Shaw. The plastic arts tend to be 'more experimental' than mainstream theatre. But Crimp also inhabits the world of books. He might mention how the banter between Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in Cervantes' novel must have influenced the rapport between Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, or he might discuss Proust's sense of time. He's as likely to talk about Paul Auster or Patrick White as about Tolstoy or Flaubert. He's read Baudrillard, but he'll talk about him as a poet rather than as a philosopher. When, in *Attempts on Her Life*, a 'Chinese proverb' is quoted – 'the darkest place is always under the lamp' (p. 251) – you're reminded that Roland Barthes is one of his favourite writers: in *A Lover's Discourse*, the same proverb occurs. He tends to like writers who are distant from what he does. He's read French minimalists; he admires Peter Handke. Other writers have percolated slowly through his

and hates being defined exclusively as a European dramatist: “That doesn’t appeal to me at all. That’s because all good writing is culturally specific, even if you aim to have a dimension that will take it beyond your immediate cultural barriers. So I am definitely a British playwright”.³ Oscillating between national and transnational concerns, the private and the public, tradition and innovation, “Crimp’s position”, as Clara Escoda Agustí points out, is thus “a hybrid one that defies any strict categorization”.⁴

The complex palimpsestic quality of Crimp’s output is in line with the versatility of this prolific author, who has experimented with different literary forms and artistic media and enjoyed a parallel career as a theatre translator/adaptor. After graduating in English from Cambridge University in 1978, Crimp moved to London with the ambition of becoming a writer. While working “in various dead-end jobs”,⁵ he wrote a novel, *Still Early Days*, and a collection of short stories, *An Anatomy*, which were both rejected by publishers. At the beginning of the Eighties, he joined the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond upon Thames, in South-West London, where his first six plays were produced.⁶ In the same years, Crimp also wrote a few plays for radio. In 1990, he obtained an Arts Council playwriting bursary and started his long-term collaboration with the Royal Court Theatre, where his most important plays have been staged.⁷ Among them, *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), one of the most experimental texts of the

consciousness. All have gone into Crimp’s theatre toolbox, which includes devices on loan from Ionesco, Beckett, Pinter, Mamet and Churchill, and these have served him well for the past two decades and more”. Sierz, pp. 160-1.

³ Quoted in Stephen Gallagher, “Crimp and Crave”, *Plays International*, (June/July 2004), pp. 12-14 (p. 14).

⁴ Clara Escoda Agustí, “Short Circuits of Desire: Language and Power in Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life*”, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 36 (2005), pp. 103-26 (p. 124).

⁵ Sierz, p. 3.

⁶ *Living Remains* (1982), *Four Attempted Acts* (1984), *A Variety of Death-Defying Acts* (1985), *Definitely the Bahamas* (1987), *Dealing with Clair* (1988), and *Play with Repeats* (1989).

⁷ *No One Sees the Video* (1990), *The Treatment* (1993), *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), *The Country* (2000), *Face to the Wall* (2002), *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), *The City* (2008), *In the Republic of Happiness* (2012).

Nineties, deserves special mention.⁸ Translated into more than twenty languages and performed all over the world, this postmodern (and, for some commentators, ‘postdramatic’)⁹ play rewrites theatrical conventions by deconstructing them. Crimp’s later career is permeated by this strong desire for new forms and generic cross-pollination. Thanks to his experience as a professional musician, in 2000, he translated Franz Lehár’s *The Merry Widow* for a production at the New York Metropolitan Opera and later wrote the librettos for the British composer George Benjamin’s *Into the Little Hill* (2006) and *Written on Skin* (2012). In addition, Crimp wrote the screenplay for François Ozon’s 2007 film *Angel*, adapted from Elizabeth Taylor’s eponymous novel (1957).

If, on the one hand, Crimp is setting new agendas and exploring different directions, on the other, he indefatigably continues to write original plays and to translate/rewrite a variety of dramatic hypotexts. By virtue of the fruitful collaborations with many British and European theatres, companies, and practitioners, it might be argued that Crimp’s sideline as a translator has been so successful that it has even “threatened to eclipse his main work”.¹⁰ Everything started after the production of *The Treatment* (1993), when Crimp, who was experiencing a creative impasse, tried to “sidestep the block by journeying back in time and updating a European classic”.¹¹ Written exclusively for Crimp’s own amusement and mental refreshment, *The Misanthrope* (1996), which set Molière’s 1666 play in Nineties London, got him “out of

⁸ More precisely, *Attempts on Her Life* premiered at the Ambassadors Theatre in the West End, which replaced the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs. As Sierz makes clear, “the Court, an early recipient of the National Lottery bonanza, had rented two theatres – the other was the Duke of York’s – as temporary bases while its crumbling Sloane Square building was being refurbished” (pp. 50-51).

⁹ For instance, see David Barnett, “When is a Play not a Drama? Two Examples of Postdramatic Theatre Texts”, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 24 (2008), pp. 14-23.

¹⁰ Sierz, p. 70.

¹¹ Sierz, p. 45.

a kind of black hole [...] of writing”.¹² This radical rewriting was the first of many Crimpian (hyper)texts based on French (hypo)texts that followed, such as Eugène Ionesco’s *The Chairs* (1997) and *Rhinoceros* (2007), Christophe Pellet’s *One More Wasted Year* (1997), Bernard-Marie Koltès’s *Roberto Zucco* (1997), Jean Genet’s *The Maids* (1999), Pierre Marivaux’s *The Triumph of Love* (1999) and *The False Servant* (2004). This translation activity has provided Crimp with that kind of regular income that writing original plays cannot guarantee: “I always say, ‘Unless you’re a genius or mediocre you’re not going to write a play a year so you have to do something else’. Many people write for film or TV; I translate from French. French is my film or TV”.¹³ Recognising the importance of this parallel career, Crimp himself distinguishes between straight translations and radical rewritings of original sources, in which his “sense of ownership” is inevitably “very strong”.¹⁴ More precisely, he divides his work into three different categories (contemporary appropriations of a hypotext, direct translations from a language he understands, and translations based on intermediate versions):

The first is where I set out to write a new play based on a pre-existing text. In what I have done there are only two examples of this: *The Misanthrope*, originally by Molière, and a play called *Cruel and Tender*. In doing this, my only aim is for me, Martin, selfishly, to write a play, because the material is already there: a sense of structure, a sense of character and a sense of situations. [...] The second category is what I would call a straight translation, particularly a straight translation from a language which I understand. And apart from English, the only language that I understand is French. So I have made a number of translations from French, and in those my aim is to provide a window, I suppose, onto the original text. [...] The third category is one that I swore I would never do. And that is doing a transparent straight translation based on an intermediate text, i.e. working from a text that I don’t understand: it might be a Russian or a German text.¹⁵

¹² Crimp quoted in Sierz, p. 45.

¹³ Crimp quoted in Sierz, p. 70.

¹⁴ Crimp quoted in Sierz, p. 70.

¹⁵ Quoted in Margherita Laera, “Theatre Translation as Collaboration: Aleks Sierz, Martin Crimp, Nathalie Abrahami, Colin Teevan, Zoë Svendsen and Michael Walton discuss Translation for the Stage”, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 21 (2011) pp. 213-25 (pp. 216-7). Crimp’s appropriation of Euripides’s *The Phoenician Women*, first staged at the Deutsches Schauspielhaus Hamburg and directed by Katie Mitchell in 2013, should be included in the first category: Mitchell’s intention was indeed to offer Crimp

This chapter will focus on Crimp's *Cruel and Tender*, an early twenty-first-century appropriation of Sophocles's most neglected tragedy, *Women of Trachis* (also translated as *Trachiniae*).¹⁶ The play was commissioned by the Wiener Festwochen, the Chichester Festival Theatre, and the Young Vic Theatre Company, and was first presented, in a co-production with the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord and Ruhrfestspiele Recklinghausen, at the Young Vic Theatre, London, on 5 May 2004. That between Crimp and Sophocles was an unexpected encounter. The Swiss director Luc Bondy, who directed *The Country (Auf dem Land)* in Zurich in 2001, was interested in the possibility of working in England and suggested that Crimp should read a couple of Greek tragedies about the mythological figure of Heracles.¹⁷ As Crimp himself declared in an interview, he was immediately struck by the weirdness of Sophocles's (hypo)text:

a solid template to experiment with. It is interesting to note that Crimp's text was directly translated into German (*Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino*) for the first production, published in French in 2015 (*Le reste vous le connaissez par le cinéma*) but not yet in English. See Vicky Angelaki's article "Alles Weitere kennen Sie aus dem Kino: Martin Crimp at the Cutting Edge of Representation", *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (2014), pp. 315-30.

¹⁶ "The fierce subject-matter of *Women of Trachis* – what was done by and to its awesome hero during the last, violent episode of his life on earth – has been consistently confused with Sophocles' purpose and methods in writing it. This has led to the play being judged a 'raw' and 'primal' artwork and indeed to it receiving an early date relative to Sophocles' other extant dramas. Many have felt not only that it depicts a far distant heroic age somehow more irrational, savage, and closer to nature than the Argos of Sophocles' *Electra* or the Thebes of his plays about Oedipus and Antigone, but that the play itself 'is' somehow more crude, irrational, elemental, and savage than they are. This view is derived from the influential set of lectures on drama published by A. W. Schlegel between 1809 and 1811, who dismissed the play in a single paragraph, claiming that it was unlikely that Sophocles wrote it at all. It was perhaps Ezra Pound's idiosyncratic 1956 version which put the play on the literary map. Since this culminated in the announcement of the dying superhero, once he recognized the fulfillment of the oracles, and has put all the available information together. 'What splendour, it all coheres', it subsequently began to be fashionable to emphasize the themes of knowledge and 'late learning' in the play. Its sophistication was demonstrated in Pat Easterling's magnificent commentary, published in 1982; there have also been several fine productions and adaptations in the professional theatre and other media". Edith Hall, *Greek Tragedy: Suffering under the Sun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 317-8.

¹⁷ "In Vienna, Festwochen artistic director Luc Bondy had always wondered what it might be like to direct a play in English. In England, David Lan of the Young Vic wanted to invite Luc Bondy to make his first-ever piece of theatre in the UK. Ruth Mackenzie, for whom Luc had directed when she ran Scottish Opera, introduced them and then, when she was appointed one of the Artistic Directors of the Chichester Festival Theatre, became, with the Wiener Festwochen, one of the three principal producers of the project. But Bondy needed a reason to work in English. An English play. In France Bondy's artistic collaborator, Geoffrey Layton, and Stéphane Lissner of the Aix Festival (and the Bouffes du Nord in Paris) were trying to persuade Bondy to undertake a staging of Handel's *Hercules*, an English music drama by a German composer. The director was reticent because of the oratorical form of the piece. But

[...] out of the blue, Luc called me and said, ‘I’d like you to read two Greek plays.’ One was [Euripides’s] *The Madness of Herakles* and the other was the *Trachiniae*. So I read both and called him back and said, ‘The one I really like is the *Trachiniae* because it’s just so strange, and somehow fits my mentality.’ So, we had a deal – even though at that point we had no idea where the thing was going to go.¹⁸

Even if Crimp’s rewriting does not spring from a strong personal interest in the classics and, in many ways, departs from the original, it should be noted that, in Elizabeth Sakellaridou’s terms, “[t]here is a strange alchemy”¹⁹ between Sophocles’s hypotext and Crimp’s (commissioned) hypertext.

Similarly to what has been done in the previous chapters, my analysis will start by examining the fractured and intimate relationship between the ancient text and its contemporary counterpart, focusing specifically on the (dis)placement of the source and on Crimp’s reworking of selected classical elements. Then, I will show how, in *Cruel and Tender*, the public enters the domestic and how gender archetypes play a crucial role in shaping war and vice versa. The fourth section will deal with the effects and affects of onstage fe/male bodies and/at war, while the fifth will shift to the macrolevel of international war(s) and mediatised terror in today’s globalised world. I will conclude with some final remarks on Crimp’s politics of rewriting.

having once heard Handel’s music he wanted to know more, and turned to its inspiration, Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*. He was in Zurich at that time, his birthplace, directing a production of *The Country* by Martin Crimp, a play about a couple who leave the city for the country and the impact on their lives of another woman. Despite a career which might suggest the contrary, Bondy says he can find few contemporary plays he wants to direct. In Crimp it was clear he had found a writer he wanted to work with. They began to discuss what Sophocles’ *Trachiniae* might look like today. To use the ancient pattern to cut a play from the material of contemporary life. Meanwhile another dialogue was taking place, between Vienna, Paris, London, Chichester and Recklinghausen, to map out a production which could find a home in each of these cities and to assemble a creative team which would include old associates of Bondy’s such as Richard Peduzzi and new ones such as Kerry Fox. Two years in the making, *Cruel and Tender* is the result of a fusion of many relationships, old and new, across borders and across time”. “It’s a Story of Europe, Old and New”, programme of the first production of Crimp’s *Cruel and Tender*. I have consulted this material at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, University of Oxford.

¹⁸ Crimp quoted in Sierz, p. 106.

¹⁹ Elizabeth Sakellaridou, “Cruel or Tender? Protocols of Atrocity, New and Old”, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 24 (2014), pp. 361-70 (p. 361).

1. “SOPHOCLES AT THE AIRPORT”: (DIS)PLACING GREEK TRAGEDY

As we have seen, the process of rewriting and restaging a source text always implies some kind of linguistic, textual, and cultural shift and, consequently, a wide range of relocation techniques and strategies. In this regard, *Cruel and Tender* well exemplifies what Gérard Genette terms *transposition diégétique* (or *transdiégétisation*).²⁰ Crimp indeed dislocates the Greek hypotext from its original spatio-temporal frame, relocates the battlefield from the Middle East to Rwanda and – at the same time – displaces the Sophoclean source by opting for a vague (but equally symbolic) Western setting, that is to say a “*temporary home close to an international airport*”.²¹ Apart from these parallel transmigrations, the original architecture of the ancient tragedy has been largely maintained. Yet, Crimp himself points out that, in this rewriting process, he has actively reacted to Sophocles, rather than passively adhering to his text: “It’s a rewriting of the original play and so the structure of the play has been kept. But the structure is something that I worked against and made my own play in reaction to the original text”.²² One of the most significant Sophoclean features to which Crimp remains faithful is the split between the female and male protagonists, who never meet in the play. As Escoda Agustí observes, Sophocles’s tragedy “is made up of two basic thematic parts, each devoted to one protagonist”:²³ the first section focuses on Deianira (whose twenty-first-century counterpart is named Amelia), while the second centres on her husband Heracles (in Crimp’s rewriting, the General). From a structural

²⁰ See pp. 97-98 of this thesis.

²¹ Martin Crimp, *Cruel and Tender* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), page unnumbered.

²² Interview with Martin Crimp, conducted by Dominic Cavendish (available at: <http://www.theatrevoice.com/audio/interview-martin-crimp-12-the-playwright-talks-to-domini/>, last accessed 3 December 2015).

²³ Clara Escoda Agustí, *Martin Crimp’s Theatre: Collapse as Resistance to Late Capitalist Society* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), p. 231.

point of view, *Cruel and Tender* is divided into three main parts: the first two pivot on Amelia and the last one on the General. Whereas Part One and Two are respectively subdivided into three and two scenes, Part Three “contains no scene division at all, and works in the manner of an epilogue”.²⁴

Sophocles’s tragedy, called after its chorus of young women, is set in the ancient Greek city of Trachis, where Deianira and some of Heracles’s children live in exile. Its main theme, as the classicist C. M. Bowra summarises, is “a woman’s tragic love for her husband. In her desire to keep him for herself she kills him without meaning to do so, and has to kill herself”.²⁵ Deianira, who is rooted in this (liminal) domestic environment, sends her son Hyllus to find his father, who is away from home. Shortly after, a Messenger announces that Heracles has won the battle and is coming back to Trachis. The hero’s herald, Lichas, brings in a group of captured young women, Heracles’s war booty, among whom is King Eurytus’s daughter, Iole. The Messenger tells Deianira the whole truth: in fact, this beautiful princess is the reason why Heracles has sacked and destroyed the city of Oechalia. Unable to cope with the domestic presence of Heracles’s concubine and impatient to get her husband back, Deianira sends him a robe soaked in what she imagines is a love philter. However, the potion turns out to be the Centaur Nessus’s poisoned blood, which corrodes the hero’s body and damages his mind. At that point, Deianira realises what she has inadvertently done. Consumed with guilt, she commits suicide just before the dying Heracles arrives. Having returned home, the hero orders Hyllus to prepare his funeral pyre and to marry Iole.

²⁴ Escoda Agustí, *Martin Crimp’s Theatre*, p. 231.

²⁵ Cecil Maurice Bowra, *Sophoclean Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1944), p. 116.

Crimp's appropriation of Sophocles's tragedy both adopts and adapts its classical source. As the theatre critic Charles Spencer writes in his *Daily Telegraph* review, the British dramatist "sticks closely" to the ancient plot, but, at the same time, "drag[s] the action into the 21st century".²⁶ As a result, Crimp inevitably dismembers and re-members the mythical narrative by reframing and relocating it. In this light, focusing on the "ruptures" in Crimp's text(ure), Mireia Aragay affirms that *Cruel and Tender* is a drama

of many fractures. Most obviously, perhaps, [...] it fractures the classical narrative of Heracles, his wife Deianeira, their son Hyllus and Heracles's prisoner of war Iole, by updating it to the early twenty-first-century context of the global 'war on terror' and by introducing a series of changes to both the characters and the narrative itself that have been often noted, not least by Crimp himself.²⁷

The play begins with Amelia sharing her marital problems with a contemporary chorus, formed by a housekeeper, a physiotherapist, and a beautician. She appears extremely anxious because her husband, a General engaged in a war on terror and subsequently accused of "[c]rimes against humanity",²⁸ has been away from home "for over a year".²⁹ Amelia thus sends their young son James (Hyllus, in the original version) to Africa to find his father. A journalist named Richard (Sophocles's Messenger) brings her "the good news"³⁰: the General is coming back soon. In the meantime, the government minister Jonathan (Lichas), visits Amelia with two African children, Laela and her little brother. Although Jonathan defines them as "survivors"³¹ of the General's military attack, Richard later informs Amelia that the two children are

²⁶ Charles Spencer, *Daily Telegraph*, 15 May 2004; *Theatre Record*, vol. XXIV, no. 10 (2004), pp. 633-4 (p. 633).

²⁷ Mireia Aragay, "A Mirror of our own Anxiety: Civilization, Violence, and Ethics in Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender*", *Atlantis: Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*, 33 (2011), pp. 75-87 (p. 76).

²⁸ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 64.

²⁹ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 2.

³⁰ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 9.

³¹ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 12.

“the spoils”³² of another kind of assault, “a sexual one”.³³ Jonathan is compelled to confess that the twenty-first-century Heracles has razed the city of Gisenyi and massacred its entire population exclusively to possess Laela, the young daughter of the African leader Seratawa. In order to win her husband back, Amelia sends him a pillow in which she has concealed a love philter. In fact, this gift turns out to be a chemical weapon with deleterious effects on the General’s body and mind. When James describes his father’s unbearable amount of suffering, Amelia kills herself offstage. The third and final part of *Cruel and Tender* is entirely devoted to the return of a disabled and shell-shocked General, who is forced to accept the full consequences of his behaviour. Before giving him up to justice, James is asked by the General to take Laela and to be the father of the small child.

This comparison between the two narratives shows how Crimp’s contemporary appropriation both quotes, reshapes, and re-(en)visions its classical source, which, in his own words, “provided me with a vessel in which to pour my feelings about current events, while having a very human story at the centre of it”.³⁴ The Greek tragedy, in other words, functions as a template that the British dramatist deconstructs and reconstructs in order to comment upon the public consequences of today’s international politics and their private reverberations.

³² Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 17.

³³ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 21.

³⁴ Crimp quoted in Gallagher, p. 14.

2. “ALL THIS INTRACTABLE GREEK STUFF – CHORUSES, MYTHS, CENTAURS, HEROES”: CRIMP’S REWRITING/RESTAGING STRATEGIES

When a (hypo)text is transplanted into a different context, a number of fractures and changes are necessary, if not inevitable. As Genette points out in *Palimpsestes*: “le mouvement habituel de la transposition diégétique est un mouvement de translation (temporelle, géographique, sociale) *proximisante* : l’hypertexte transpose la diégèse de son hypotexte pour la rapprocher et l’actualiser aux yeux de son propre public”.³⁵ In “Rewriting Molière”, the Preface to *The Misanthrope*, Crimp himself stresses the need to depart – to a greater or lesser extent – from the source text, reconsidering and reworking some vulnerable elements in order to provide the receiving audience with an accessible product, suitable for the world they live in:

[...] how do you ‘translate’ (literally ‘move from one place to another’) an artefact that is so much a product of seventeenth-century Paris and Versailles? One answer – and the one I’ve attempted here – is to opt for a contemporary setting, and then explore the consequences, whatever deviations and departures from the original that may involve.³⁶

In this light, the adaptor’s fresh approach becomes a sign of respect towards his/her literary precursor rather than an act of misreading or an arbitrary fracture:

[...] if, three hundred years later, reflecting the contemporary world has meant taking certain ‘liberties’ with the text, this is only in the belief that – at this distance in time – reinvention, rewriting of one writer’s work by another, is ‘fidelity’ of the truest and most passionate kind.³⁷

Some years later, Crimp observes that every contemporary author reacts to ancient Greek literature in a different way. If a poet such as Ted Hughes slips into the textual

³⁵ Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), p. 351 [original emphasis].

³⁶ Martin Crimp, *The Misanthrope*, in Crimp, *Plays Two: No One Sees the Video, The Misanthrope, Attempts on Her Life, The Country*, introduced by the author (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), pp. 95-196 (pp. 97-98).

³⁷ Crimp, *The Misanthrope*, p. 98.

skin of the original and leaves the classical dimension largely untouched, Crimp confirms that his own urge is to write a dramatic artefact which is the product of today's world and, at the same time, has the capacity to hold a mirror to contemporaneity:

Every writer writes/re-writes the Greeks in his or her own image, and to satisfy an artistic need. Ted Hughes, for example, responds to the poetry of Aeschylus as a poet, by tying his own knots into the original fabric, and leaving the ancient world intact. For me it was more important to write a play than to write poetry, and I couldn't imagine writing a play that wasn't cut, linguistically, culturally, from the material of contemporary life.³⁸

This section will thus examine Crimp's own strategies to update what he defines as "all this intractable Greek stuff – choruses, myths, centaurs, heroes".³⁹

In the first place, the adaptation of choruses, one of the most distinctive features of Greek tragedy, constitutes a thorny problem for contemporary playwrights, and Crimp's reaction is highly revealing in this regard. If, on the one hand, the British dramatist does not seem to be much interested in this classical convention ("We don't really do choruses, or it is not really something that I do or am particularly interested in"⁴⁰), on the other hand, he feels both compelled and challenged to reconsider this theatrical element ("So it was something that I obviously had to – I wanted to deal with it, because it is a kind of challenge. I wanted to deal with it in some way or other"⁴¹). Crimp's words thus give us a sense of the commonly ambivalent response to the chorus, nowadays perceived as a problematic device which, for various reasons, is prone to become awkward, defamiliarising, and even disturbing. First, from an aesthetic and strictly theatrical perspective, in a naturalistic *mise en scène* the chorus appears to be an artificial and anachronistic element. Secondly, it can hardly be denied that this convention is laden with socio-political overtones. Indeed, the fifth-century tragic

³⁸ Martin Crimp, "Sophocles and the War Against Terror", *Guardian*, 8 May 2004.

³⁹ Crimp, "Sophocles and the War Against Terror".

⁴⁰ Quoted in Laera, "Theatre Translation as Collaboration", p. 222.

⁴¹ Quoted in Laera, "Theatre Translation as Collaboration", p. 222.

chorus, “performed by twelve to fifteen citizens singing their lines in unison while dancing to music in the orchestra, the circular area of the stage in Greek amphitheatres”,⁴² evoked a strong sense of community which has progressively been lost in our late capitalist society based on individualism. As Crimp himself perceptively notes, “I do think there is an issue about choruses. And I think it is to do with the society we live in, because I think we live in a society of individual units. And I think that we find it harder to accept the chorus”.⁴³

In *Cruel and Tender*, Crimp rewrites Sophocles’s chorus by adopting “a problem-solving approach [...], coupled with one’s own taste”.⁴⁴ The British playwright replaces the original group of local women with three female characters – the Housekeeper (Rachel), the Physiotherapist (Cathy), and the Beautician (Nicola) – who, despite their vague characterization intervene separately, defying the idea of a collective voice speaking in unison. Moreover, Crimp decides to add a couple of recordings of Billie Holiday singing “My Man” and “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love”, “given that the original chorus danced and sang”.⁴⁵ Also, as Clara Escoda Agustí observes, in the unpublished version of the play (modified during rehearsals), Amelia’s personal assistants, who form Crimp’s late capitalist anti-chorus, are merely indicated by the numbers 1, 2, and 3, a fact which emphasises their depersonalization and identification with a subordinate role:

Identifying them by numbers seems like a more coherent option if one bears in mind Crimp’s intention throughout the play to empty these characters of subjective traits. He presents them as depoliticized beings who simply perform the roles they are ordained, unquestioningly partaking of the values of

⁴² Margherita Laera, *Reaching Athens: Community, Democracy and Other Mythologies in Adaptations of Greek Tragedies* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2013), p. 65.

⁴³ Quoted in Laera, “Theatre Translation as Collaboration”, p. 224.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Laera, “Theatre Translation as Collaboration”, p. 222.

⁴⁵ Crimp, “Sophocles and the War against Terror”.

consumerism and bent on teaching Amelia and Laela to behave like the wives of a man of status by making them concentrate on their bodies and appearance.⁴⁶

While in Sophocles's tragedy the young women of Trachis empathise with Deianira and wholeheartedly support her throughout, Crimp's "gossip-prone group of in-house staff",⁴⁷ as I will discuss later in this chapter, mainly concentrates on Amelia's body, which needs to be disciplined and made to conform to the beauty ideals expected by our image-based society.

The appropriation of the tragic chorus is not the only challenge that Crimp faces while rewriting *Women of Trachis*, since several other elements of Sophocles's mythical narrative also require to be adapted to the twenty-first-century frame in which they are inserted. This is well exemplified by the transformation of the ancient tunic soaked in Nessus's blood into a powerful chemical weapon,⁴⁸ a functional metamorphosis that Genette would term *transformation pragmatique*. For the French literary theorist, these kinds of practical reworkings are inevitable consequences of a *transposition diégétique*: "on ne peut guère transférer une action antique à l'époque moderne sans modifier quelques actions (un coup de poignard deviendra coup de pistolet, etc.)".⁴⁹

The 'domestication' of an anachronistic element such as the robe sent to Heracles frequently implies a parallel reinterpretation of some characters. In this case, the mythological Centaur Nessus is replaced by a contemporary figure named Robert, a

⁴⁶ Escoda Agustí, *Martin Crimp's Theatre*, p. 238. I thank her for sharing the unpublished version of *Cruel and Tender*.

⁴⁷ Laera, *Reaching Athens*, p. 61.

⁴⁸ When interviewed by Sierz, Crimp declared that the idea of a chemical weapon was his daughter's: "I was on holiday in France, in the sea, and I was thinking about how to find a modern equivalent of the poisoned shirt, and my daughter had this brilliant idea of psychotropic drugs. It was only after I'd finished writing that I found this web page about recent Pentagon research into using psychotropic drugs to induce happy states to mentally disable your opponents. The dreadful thing is that you just have to dream up some kind of awful imaginary weapon – and someone is already developing it. Of course, in the play Amelia has been tricked. The chemical isn't the 'happy' drug she think it is, but one of the organophosphates, which were banned by the Geneva Convention, although countries are still developing them. And we're not talking about Iraq, we're talking about the UK and the USA". Quoted in Sierz, p. 108.

⁴⁹ Genette, p. 360.

left-wing lab researcher who has developed the deleterious psychotropic drug and given it to Amelia as a present:

He told me that this
whatever it is
chemical
that this chemical
his baby
took the will to fight out of a soldier
by making the soldier yearn for a safe place
making him feel the need of a safe place
an absolute need
for the love and the reassurance
of the person he was closest to.⁵⁰

Besides the Centaur, other supporting characters undergo necessary transformations: in *Cruel and Tender*, Sophocles's Messenger becomes a journalist, Richard, whereas Lichas mutates from Heracles's herald into a twenty-first-century spin doctor, Jonathan. These two figures, especially the government minister, are highly revealing about the fragmentation and inconsistency of contemporary (mis)communication, a web of half-truths – when not obvious lies – constantly interrupted by mobile phones ringing and interspersed with flirting attempts.

The two main characters in Sophocles's tragedy are equally reshaped and updated by Crimp, as we will see in the following sections. As a result of this *transposition diégétique*, the mythical hero Heracles and his wife Deianira are taken out of their original context and effectively (dis)placed in a liminal and globalised space, whose non-specificity is in line with their exiled condition in the source. Crimp affirms that, in his appropriation of the play,

“exile” becomes the classic non-place of the developed world: the no-man's-land of food-preparation sheds, long-term car-parks and corporate hotels that cluster round a perpetually illuminated international airport. Close to the airport we're close to the sacred sites of retailing, as well as to the X-ray machines

⁵⁰ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, pp. 29-30.

which allow us to examine the entrails of our luggage for favourable or unfavourable omens.⁵¹

Despite the distinctively contemporary flavour of Crimp's 'globalised' rewriting (one that intriguingly redeploys Marc Augé's notion of the *non-lieu*),⁵² the classical resurfaces in several places in *Cruel and Tender*. In keeping with this authorial approach, the first production of the play was remarkably successful at merging antiquity and contemporaneity from a visual and performative point of view, as the *dramaturg* Edward Kemp notes:

What the production found, in a very satisfying way, was a visual and acting language that inhabited all three time zones of the theatre event: the period when the play was written; the world today; and the world of the archetype. For example, designer Richard Peduzzi created a set that was a completely anonymous hotel room on the edge of an international airport but its colours alluded to the classical age: the ash-grey and vermilion suggested Pompeii. On the wall was a relief of an archetypal classical image, and this was both an allusion to archetypal myths and a comment on what our civilisation does with them: we frame them and put them on the wall as replicas.⁵³

This anonymous, minimalist, and equally stratified setting, (dis)located at the crossroads of various routes, offered the appropriate context for a fertile cross-pollination between the classical and the contemporary, and – at the same time – a suitably neutral space for the gender(ed) war between Amelia and the General, who mirror the female domestic sphere and the male military world, respectively.

3. GENDER(ED) WARS: WHEN THE PUBLIC ENTERS THE DOMESTIC

Crimp is deeply fascinated by the inherent modernity of an ancient tragedy in which the two protagonists, Heracles and Deianira, and the opposed dimensions they

⁵¹ Crimp, "Sophocles and the War against Terror".

⁵² Marc Augé, *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. by John Howe (London and New York: Verso, 1995[1992]).

⁵³ Quoted in Sierz, p. 208.

stand for, are caught up in a constant fight but never actually meet on stage: “Two and a half thousand years before the invention of psychology, Sophocles had the brilliant idea of writing a play in which this gender split is explicit: not only do male and female live in separate worlds, but husband and wife, in this particular drama, don’t even meet”.⁵⁴ For the British playwright, just as intriguing is the fact that his Greek precursor devotes the largest portion of his dramatic text to the inner struggles of the female character, while Heracles, the most celebrated hero of antiquity, appears only later in the tragedy, his body wracked with intolerable pain:

He [Sophocles] shows us the man only in the final pages of the text, broken and angry (the fate of so many traumatised soldiers), rotting like Kafka’s abandoned beetle, while he devotes the major part of the play (and in this he seems so modern) to a woman who struggles to deal with the man’s absence, violence, and infidelity.⁵⁵

As previously said, Crimp maintains Sophocles’s thematically-fractured structural configuration: in line with the tragic hypotext, Amelia dominates two thirds of *Cruel and Tender*, while the General is confined to the final section. However, despite Amelia’s predominance, it is important to stress that the two main figures are intimately connected throughout the play. And, as with his contemporary counterpart, Sophocles’s Heracles is always present, despite his dramatic and theatrical absence. As Bowra observes,

though Deianira is on the stage longer than Heracles, she is not more important than he is. He is always present in her mind and in ours. Throughout we think of her in relation to him and of him in relation to her. Even at the end, when his last hours almost absorb our attention, she is not entirely absent from our thoughts. The subject of the play is the single, shared destiny of a man and a woman.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Crimp, “Sophocles and the War against Terror”.

⁵⁵ Crimp, “Sophocles and the War against Terror”.

⁵⁶ Bowra, p. 116.

If, on the one hand, the destiny of Deianira/Amelia and that of Heracles/the General are clearly intermingled and interdependent, in both versions of the play, the tragic hero and his wife can be considered two antagonists by virtue of their opposed characteristics.

While the female protagonist is trapped in a claustrophobic domestic environment (“JAMES: You don’t even leave / the *house*. [...] It’s like you live in a / *bunker*”⁵⁷), her male opponent is an absent husband engaged in ‘public affairs’ away from home. More precisely, Crimp’s Amelia is an attractive and strong woman restlessly wandering around the temporary house in which she is forced to live in captivity (“she’s like a bird in a box”⁵⁸), whereas the General is said to have been abroad for over one year fighting terrorism – or, at least, we might argue that this international war has provided him with a convenient excuse for ignoring his family:

AMELIA

[...]

Because my husband is sent out
on one operation after another
with the aim—the apparent aim—
of eradicating terror: not understanding
that the more he fights terror
the more he creates terror—
and even invites terror—who has no eyelids—
into his own bed.⁵⁹

This powerful image conjured up by Amelia shows how the play blends the public, or even global, dimension of terrorism and its capacity to enter the most private and intimate of spheres. As a matter of fact, the contemporary war fought by the General intermingles with a distinctively (and disturbingly) personal conflict, provoked by the consequences of his dangerous obsession with a beautiful sub-Saharan girl. Initially conquered by the warrior-hero, Laela, in turn, invades Amelia’s privacy and colonises

⁵⁷ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 42 [original emphasis].

⁵⁸ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 6.

⁵⁹ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 2.

her territory, arousing the woman's jealousy. In this respect, as Vicky Angelaki observes, this rewriting of Sophocles's tragedy is constructed around a striking metaphor – "marriage as war, which enabled Crimp to examine domestic conflict through the prism of the military one and vice versa".⁶⁰ The theatrical stage thus becomes an arena in which the magnetic personalities of Amelia and the General, as well as the diametrically opposed worlds and set of values they convey, violently clash.

From her first appearance at the beginning of the play, Amelia, "one of Crimp's particularly memorable, larger than life female characters",⁶¹ imposes herself as a strong, intelligent, and charismatic woman. Despite all her familial troubles, she resolutely refuses to be considered a victim of the oppressive patriarchal system to which she has been subjugated since her childhood:

AMELIA

There are women who believe
all men are rapists.
I don't believe that
because if I did believe that
how—as a woman—could I go on living
with the label 'victim'?
Because I am not a victim—oh no—
that's not a part I'm willing to play—believe me.⁶²

This excerpt from the opening monologue gives us a sense of Amelia's uncommon dignity and eloquence, and confirms that language is indeed the most powerful weapon with which she is armed.⁶³ However, Amelia's stubborn resistance and fierce determination to save her broken marriage should not lead us to think of her as an evil figure such as Clytemnestra or Medea, two revengeful women who intentionally kill

⁶⁰ Vicky Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.125.

⁶¹ Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp*, p. 124.

⁶² Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 1.

⁶³ See Vicky Angelaki, "The Private and the Public Wars: A Play by Martin Crimp", *Platform*, 1 (2006), pp. 32-41 (p. 34).

their husbands (and even innocent children). It should be noted that, in *Women of Trachis*, Sophocles had already reworked and mitigated the originally wild figure of Deianira, whose name translates as ‘the destroyer of her husband’. As Bowra points out:

If the name Deianira [...] conveys anything about the original character of its possessor, it suggests that in the oldest legends Deianira was a kind of Clytaemnestra who slew her husband, perhaps out of jealousy for another woman. Or it may have a different origin and be connected with the common epithet for an Amazon [...]. In that case Deianira would be a woman with the strength of a man, and a faint echo of this may survive in a statement that she drove a chariot and practised war. But these dim hints tell very little. If they were known to Sophocles, he neglected them and presented quite a different Deianira.⁶⁴

Crimp himself is well aware of Sophocles’s reinterpretation of the original female figure, a woman who finds herself in an extremely difficult and increasingly stressful situation and just struggles to find a possible solution: “Sophocles creates a character that seems to be less woman as constructed by man (witch-bitch-predator) and more woman as women more frequently see themselves: resilient problem-solvers”.⁶⁵ It might be reasonably argued that, like Sophocles’s Deianira, Crimp’s Amelia is not a dangerous *dominatrix* ready to punish her man by torturing him to death, but a present-day woman facing the devastating consequences of the private echoes of a public war.

At the beginning of the play, Amelia dominates completely the domestic environment in which she is embedded. This is well exemplified by the promptness and (seeming) devotion of her trio of servants, always willing to wait on their mistress.

However, when Jonathan brings in Laela and the small child, the domestic power

⁶⁴ Bowra, p. 117.

⁶⁵ “And Amelia’s problems” Crimp adds, “are numerous. A random act of violence by her husband – what today we would call a war crime – means she’s been put into “exile”, ie forced to set up temporary home in another city-state or *polis*. Her son treats her with adolescent disdain. The ‘messengers’ who bring Heracles’s girlfriend into her house lie to her out of kindness, or tell the truth out of malice. But as each illusion about her husband is removed, far from crumbling, she confronts the new situation and looks for ways to win back his love. There’s an acute sense of her domestic confinement, of the extreme difficulty of acting on the external world, when that world, and even the information about it, is being controlled by men. Amelia resists control, rejects the label ‘victim’”. “Sophocles and the War against Terror”.

dynamics are subverted. Amelia offers the guests generous hospitality and, at the same time, tries to ‘westernise’ these two captives from darkest Africa by giving them educational toys:

I want these children washed and given beds. I want them given thick sheets—cotton ones—white ones—and a light—they must have a light in the room—pink perhaps—and toys. Find them some of Jamie’s old toys—but nothing frightening, please—no guns, no helicopters. And books.⁶⁶

The more they adapt to the material comforts of this new environment, the more Amelia loses control of her private space. Significantly, the second part of *Cruel and Tender* opens by staging the General’s concubine while, “*exactly like Amelia in the earlier scene, is being given beauty treatment by the Beautician and Physiotherapist*”.⁶⁷ Shortly after, Amelia appears and notices that Laela is wearing her necklace. While the woman is annoyed, her personal assistants empathise with the uninvited guest:

The girls all laugh. Amelia appears. They go quiet.
AMELIA: What’s that round your neck, Laela?
PHYSIOTHERAPIST: You’d left it in the bathroom.
AMELIA: I’ve told you: she’s not to take my things.
HOUSEKEEPER: She doesn’t mean any harm.⁶⁸

Convinced that “[a] man can have two wives under one blanket”,⁶⁹ the ‘colonised’ girl from Gisenyi transforms herself into a Western ‘coloniser’, eager to invade Amelia’s domestic territory and to obtain what she thinks she is entitled to. While Laela comfortably shares Amelia’s space and seems to feel at ease in this embarrassing situation, the General’s wife – at this stage at war with everybody else in the house – is evidently more and more distressed and struggles to defend her dominion. In his review of the first production of the play, the theatre critic Jeremy Kingston effectively stresses Amelia’s territorial defensiveness by comparing her to a feline: “[Kerry] Fox presents

⁶⁶ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 14.

⁶⁷ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 25.

⁶⁸ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 26.

⁶⁹ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 27.

her as a figure of wonderfully fierce and frustrated intelligence, stalking her territory like a panther”.⁷⁰

In Part Three, this all-female environment becomes an imaginative battlefield for the shell-shocked returning General. While the household staff are relaxing with beauty treatments and women’s magazines and chatting about Amelia’s recent suicide, Heracles’s counterpart “*can be heard approaching, half speaking, half singing*”⁷¹ some lines of “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love”. Remarkably, Crimp declared that this first appearance of the General and the intriguing idea of his madness were inspired by some lyrical ‘explosions’ in the tragic hypotext:

In the first place, I whizzed through the Penguin translation, but it was really interesting to look at the Greek original because there are some strange things in it. When Herakles is brought in, injured, the verse goes completely mad. Odd little onomatopoeic phrases express his distress. It must have been the most extraordinary thing at the time because he’s using the lyric form that’s usually reserved for the chorus. This is why, when he comes in, I have him sing the Billie Holiday number.⁷²

The present-day Heracles thus becomes a physically and mentally disabled veteran, experiencing excruciating pain and suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which results in paranoid behaviour, alienation, emotional numbness, sudden changes in mood, and occasional outbursts of violence. In his damaged mind, the horrific memories of the conflict merge with current everyday life and the domestic territory is turned into an appendix of the war arena. As a result, the General is on guard all the time, always ready to start fighting:

GENERAL: Then tell me something, Jamie: why is it so quiet here? When is the attack?

JAMES: You’re at home, Dad.

⁷⁰ Jeremy Kingston, “Greek Tragedy for a Vengeful Modern World”, *The Times*, 15 May 2004, p. 25.

⁷¹ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 50.

⁷² Quoted in Sierz, p. 106.

GENERAL: I know where I am. And I know what's it's like before the attack. Sometimes it's so quiet you can hear the ants running over your boots. (*Smiles*).⁷³

The General's disconnection from reality is mirrored by his incoherent and inconclusive lines, diametrically opposed to Amelia's. "Speaking in fragments", Escoda Agustí observes, the combat veteran "keeps fighting against his decomposing mind, trying to note everything down in a diary, and talking about a tight schedule he has to adhere to".⁷⁴

GENERAL (*to Housekeeper*)

Now listen:
tell Amelia we're having lunch at the Chinese Embassy
then at three o'clock
put this in the diary
because at three o'clock
I'm talking to the minister about helicopters
because there are not enough helicopters
and I have men dying because of it and then at half past four
this should be in the diary
at half past four I am appearing on television
until half past five when a car is taking Amelia and myself
and make sure this car is booked
because we need to go directly to the airport
for a meeting at the United Nations in New York.⁷⁵

In this rambling speech, interspersed with repetitions, the General intermingles past, present, and possibly future events (even ignoring that his wife has killed herself). In *Cruel and Tender*, as Angelaki suggests, different kinds of monologues aim to present two antithetical dimensions: "The first world rests within the private, domestic domain and unveils the tensions of this environment with eloquence. The second world inhabits the public, military domain of the battlefield and records its brutality with crudeness".⁷⁶

⁷³ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 59.

⁷⁴ Escoda Agustí, *Martin Crimp's Theatre*, p. 257.

⁷⁵ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 51.

⁷⁶ Angelaki, "The Private and the Public Wars", p. 36.

As we have seen, the gender split around which Crimp's play revolves (and evolves) derives from its tragic hypotext. The British dramatist admits that it was thanks to a groundbreaking book he was reading at that time, Joshua S. Goldstein's *War and Gender* (2001), that he could understand the importance of gender roles in Sophocles's *Women of Trachis*: "What was interesting was that the Greek play mirrored the gender archetypes in this book. So the play begins with the woman staying behind to maintain the home, than you see what happens to the man who is conditioned to fight wars".⁷⁷ What Goldstein's interdisciplinary study demonstrates is the fact that "[t]he gendering of war [...] results from the combination of culturally constructed gender roles with real but modest biological differences".⁷⁸ In other words, even if men are biologically better equipped for war, the historical record shows that women are capable of fighting as well. Therefore, it might reasonably be argued that gendered (war) roles are cultural artefacts, rooted in the idea that men, who need to be conditioned to perform successfully in combat in order to overcome their inherent aversion to war, are the ones who have to do the killing and protect the female domestic environment. Going through initiation rituals, men construct their masculinity and become brave fighters, eager to dominate and 'feminise' their enemies. For Crimp, the historical evidence of this 're-gendering' of the defeated was particularly interesting: "In the 1991 Gulf war US soldiers wrote on bombs 'Bend Over Saddam'; compare this with a vase painting from 425 BC showing a victorious Greek, erect penis in hand, rushing to penetrate a defeated (male) Persian".⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Quoted in Gallagher, pp. 13-14.

⁷⁸ Joshua S. Goldstein, *War and Gender* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 6.

⁷⁹ Crimp, "Sophocles and the War against Terror".

Even if *War and Gender* gave Crimp an “intellectual way of understanding the play”,⁸⁰ the British writer declared that it was easier for him to interpret the character of Deianira, a woman confined to her domestic space and thus reinforcing the gender archetypes, than Heracles, an aggressive male figure that he found profoundly disturbing. Being an instinctively anti-war person, Crimp could not understand soldiers and the reasons which pushed them to kill. Therefore, he had to do a lot of reading about the topic and it was only when he realised that soldiers were victims of the patriarchal system trained and conditioned to do unnatural things that he could understand Sophocles’s hero and rewrite this figure according to his own taste:

I started with the original. In the play, Herakles is quite repulsive, which is why – I assume – it is so rarely performed. So the challenge was to understand him. I went to the British Library and read books on Vietnam, and post-traumatic stress. There’s a book called *Achilles in Vietnam*, which tries to show how accurate Homer was about the behaviour of soldiers in combat. And, of course, the more I read about soldiers, the more I understood that killing hardly ever comes naturally to people, which is why military training is so intense – you have to train young men to behave in this way. And the testimony of returning veterans was particularly disturbing: men who’d get up regularly through the night to ‘patrol’ their homes, who saw their loved ones as if they were looking through ‘a dirty pane of glass’ (an image I never found a place for, unfortunately), and of course men with paranoid fixations about ‘the government’. So I came to see the General very much as a victim of his political masters.⁸¹

Crimp’s approach to rewriting is highly revealing in that it shows how, starting from a close reading of the source and drawing on interdisciplinary critical material, a present-day dramatist can rework an ancient text in an equally accurate and subversive fashion, mixing tragic roots with their distinctively contemporary reverberations.

⁸⁰ Interview with Crimp conducted by Cavendish.

⁸¹ Quoted in Sierz, p. 107. See also Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 2003 [1994]).

4. FE/MALE BODIES AND/AT WAR: EFFECTS AND AFFECTS

As discussed in the previous section, *Cruel and Tender* interweaves the violent consequences of a large-scale conflict and their domestic echoes. This stratification and metastatic spread of war, as well as the consequent encounter between global terror and emotional terrorism, inscribes itself onto the female and male bodies, that metaphorically collide on stage. Considering the body as a protean and permeable structure, created and shaped by external forces and cultural constructions, this section aims to explore the effects (and affects) of macro- and micro-politics on the physical, focusing on the ways in which onstage bodies can be at war with themselves and each other in today's Western society.

4.1 Disciplining Female Bodies

In the first two parts of the play, the (self)regulation of Amelia's body takes centre stage. Her opening monologue, as Aragay notes, shows that the female protagonist "has experienced from an early age the symbolic violence late capitalism exercises on bodies, particularly those of women, as it drills them into submission".⁸²

When still a teenager, a man she did not know asked her father for her hand in marriage:

I was just fifteen
living with my father
living very very quietly with my father
when the first man came to my father
wanting me. He described to him
the various ways he wanted me
while I listened outside the door in the very short skirt
and the very high-heeled agonising shoes

⁸² Aragay, p. 80.

I had begged and begged to be allowed to wear.⁸³

Amelia, who was eavesdropping on their conversation, felt upset about the detailed description of the forms her suitor's sexual desire assumed and "ran up to [her] room. Locked the door. Stopped eating".⁸⁴ Feeling that she was nothing more to him than an object, the girl deliberately inflicted damage on her own body by refusing food. In an attempt to rebel against the oppressive (and phallographic) patriarchal system, Amelia's self-punishment is, in fact, the direct result of those "highly efficient mechanisms of interpellation" – typical of late capitalist Western society – "that discipline bodies into exercising strict self-regulation, even in the form of self-directed violence".⁸⁵ Early anorexia is merely the first example of Amelia's inclination towards self-damage. Indeed, in the powerful scene closing Part Two, the woman tightly "*clenches her fist around one of the shattered wine-glasses on the table and squeezes as hard as she can*".⁸⁶ In addition, we cannot help feeling that her subsequent suicide, which happens behind the scenes in keeping with Greek theatrical conventions, is the final act of the self-destruction process of a woman who has given up her dreams to become a 'good' wife and mother:

I am eighteenth years old and I have a house
a husband and a bed—
a bed with white pillows—
and a child.
I abandon my course at university
to become the mother of a child—
even if he—the father—
the soldier who is by now of course the great general—
only sees this child at distant intervals
like a farmer inspecting a crop
in a remote field.⁸⁷

⁸³ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 1.

⁸⁴ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 1.

⁸⁵ Aragay, pp. 79-80.

⁸⁶ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 46.

⁸⁷ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 2.

It might be argued that Amelia's self-damaging behaviour is coupled with a certain narcissism. Always accompanied by a trio of servants devoted to her body care and stress management, Amelia spends the days disciplining her body through beauty treatments, exercises, and tension-releasing massages.⁸⁸ As Escoda Agustí indicates, all that Amelia can do in order to hold on to her husband and maintain her role in the house is to conform to contemporary beauty ideals:

As the wife of a man of status, Amelia is dependent on her husband's living standard, and domesticity, motherhood and the body are the sole areas where she is supposed to invest her narcissism. Yet, at the same time, having no status besides that of being the wife of a powerful man, the body is all that Amelia has.⁸⁹

Like many other women, in order to be attractive Amelia uses a plethora of beauty weapons, including dresses, shoes, jewellery, and perfumes, seduction objects which recur throughout the play. As we have seen, when she was just fifteen years old, she already begged to wear a very short skirt and extremely high-heeled shoes. Now Amelia is a woman in her forties, awaiting her husband in that red dress he wanted her to put on the night she confessed she betrayed him with the government minister:

When I slept with you
Jonathan
I told him the same evening
and after he'd punched his fist through the bathroom wall
he made me put on my red dress
and took me dancing.⁹⁰

In the second scene of Part Two, Amelia enters the room in the same, evocative dress, asking the Beautician to zip her up. Both Nicola and James observe that the red dress, that Amelia "*smoothes [...] over her hips*",⁹¹ is probably too tight for her:

JAMES: [...] Nice dress.

⁸⁸ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, pp. 5-7.

⁸⁹ Escoda Agustí, *Martin Crimp's Theatre*, p. 245.

⁹⁰ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 22.

⁹¹ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 35.

[...]
Maybe a bit tight.
AMELIA: What?
JAMES: Tight. Maybe a / bit tight.
AMELIA: That's the style. It's a tight style.⁹²

These comments make patent Amelia's struggle to adhere to contemporary beauty ideals by adapting her body to a provocative dress. They also seem to imply that the woman is not only at war with herself but also with the sensuous body of Laela, which has inflamed the General. Amelia thus spends most of her time trying to look young and attractive, while her husband's concubine – a foreign creature who initially did not speak English properly – becomes more and more articulate, invades her domestic territory, and takes on her role by appropriating the same seduction weapons and beauty rituals:

BEAUTICIAN: That's very good, Laela. Did you learn English at school?
LAELA: Only boys go to school. I learn English at Tuseme club. (*Turns page* [of a women's magazine].) Oh, look at this dress! I want this dress!
BEAUTICIAN: What's Tuseme club?
LAELA: Tuseme club is HIV Aids learning club. You think he'll buy me this dress?
PHYSIOTHERAPIST: Only if you're nice to him.
LAELA: Oh, I'm always nice to him.⁹³

Remarkably, just before Amelia's suicide, the two women seem to negotiate an unexpected armistice. Amelia, who is getting slightly drunk, fantasises about going shopping at the airport with Laela in order to buy shoes and luggage on wheels. She then delivers one of her most vivid, if not visionary, monologues: the woman imagines Laela and herself being X-rayed at the airport and stripped because of "some sharp object / some spike / something inside of [them]".⁹⁴ Like two terrorists, the two women would have deliberately concealed this dangerous object in their bodies, thus revealing

⁹² Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, pp. 37-38.

⁹³ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, pp. 25-26.

⁹⁴ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 45.

the potentially violent nature of the feminine. This scene is a turning point, in that it demonstrates how the seeds of violence can germinate everywhere, even in a traditionally nurturing and docile female body. Moreover, in a final twist, Amelia's speech might be considered, as Aragay suggests, "an act of testimony [...] that implicates the two women in a thoroughly ethical mode of being and relating, a bond of mutual responsibility".⁹⁵

4.2 Unsexing and Re-Gendering the Male Body

Even if it is kept 'offpage'/offstage in both Part One and Two, the General's body looms large over *Cruel and Tender* until its appearance in Part Three. The (im)materiality of its absence raises the expectations of the readers/audience and arouses their curiosity about the image of this contemporary (anti)hero, who has tried to fight terrorism by enhancing it. The inherent ambiguity of this controversial character, of which both Sophocles and Euripides were well aware, is underlined by Sakellaridou:

There is [...] an unexpected reversal of the tragic canon in the way the two Greek tragedians [...] approach, in their respective plays, the personality of Herakles, a towering figure in Greek mythology and an emblematic one in the western cultural tradition. Herakles was apotheosised as the supreme hero of antiquity, a semi-god who first fought terror in the world: a warrior, a victor, and a protector of humanity. However, he was also charged with having committed unholy and criminal acts against cities and individuals – not excluding members of his own family: his wife and children. This converse image places the Greek hero at the other end of terror, as its instigator [...].⁹⁶

In keeping with Sophocles, Crimp explores the physical unmaking of this great warrior-hero, whose body is severely damaged and, at the same time, emasculated by the pernicious consequences of a public war becoming private.

⁹⁵ Aragay, p. 84.

⁹⁶ Sakellaridou, p. 361.

At first, the evocative absence of the General leads readers/spectators to conjure up the image of an invincible, bellicose, muscular, and phallic hero, who is eager to penetrate women and ‘feminise’ defeated soldiers, one of those men, in Amelia’s words, “whose minds are blank / who fuck you the way they fuck the enemy— / I mean with the same tenderness”.⁹⁷ However, in the second scene of Part Two, the hypervirile image we have built up crumbles when confronted with James’s description of the catastrophic impact of the chemical weapon on his father’s body. His words about the episode taking place in Africa verbally enact the effects of Amelia’s fatal gift in a highly visible way. When James wakes up and can hear the General vomiting in the bathroom, his son blames the Tex-Mex African pizza, “that snake-meat enchilada dished up at the victory celebration in the officers’ canteen”.⁹⁸ But he soon realises that Mexican food cannot annihilate his father, that great hero “who can walk into fire”⁹⁹ and is now “sucking in air—sucking and sucking in the air [...] like he’s drowning in his own spit”.¹⁰⁰ Even more disturbingly, the General seems to be possessed by an alien force which has invaded his body. James’s speech becomes increasingly rambling and fragmented:

it’s crawling under his skin—like an animal, Mum, trying to slide out from underneath—which is the chemical—the animal under the skin—the pain—the chemical—the thing your friend brought—the gift—the gift / your friend brought—[...]—the gift of pain—the chemical—your chemical under the skin.¹⁰¹

The warrior-hero has turned into a dehumanised creature, with frightening, cat-like eyes, and James is horrified to see this metamorphosis:

⁹⁷ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 7.

⁹⁸ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 39.

⁹⁹ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 39.

¹⁰⁰ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 40.

¹⁰¹ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 40.

it's worked its way up his spine and into his eyes—he's got these eyes like a cat in the sun—pin-point eyes—he isn't human, Mum—that's what you and your friend have done to him—[...]—not even human. Which is why when he talks to me—when he says 'It's going dark: give me your hand'—when he says 'Help me, help me, give me your fucking hand' there is no way I am going to let this person—no—sorry—thing—no way I am going to let this thing with the pin-point fucking eyes that used to be my dad even *touch* me".¹⁰²

Despite James's evident reluctance, it should be stressed that the destruction of the General's body has an ethical potential, because it forces this vainglorious man to see himself, for the first time, as a fragile human being, a victim who needs to be helped by others. This means, as Escoda Agustí observes, that the chemical weapon, "which renders the General vulnerable and dependent, suddenly makes him realize the destructive effects of the war. He thus returns home in a shell-shocked state of collapse".¹⁰³

The General's first appearance is anticipated by a detailed stage direction at the beginning of Part Three, describing a nurse kit: *There's a new object in the room: a small stainless-steel trolley containing items (cotton-wool pads, bottle of alcohol, medication, towels, thermometer, plastic gloves etc.) to care for an invalid.*¹⁰⁴ When the 'hero' finally enters the scene, "*dressed in a tracksuit*",¹⁰⁵ half speaking, half singing a Billie Holiday song and surveying the room in a paranoid fashion, we can immediately realise to what extent the war has affected his body and his mind. Slightly later in the text, Crimp adds another pivotal stage direction, whose "affectivity"¹⁰⁶ has been pointed out by some critics:

¹⁰² Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 40 [original emphasis].

¹⁰³ Escoda Agustí, *Martin Crimp's Theatre*, p. 253.

¹⁰⁴ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 47.

¹⁰⁵ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 50.

¹⁰⁶ Sakellaridou, p. 366. "How affective the actual sight of Herakles in his excruciating pain was for the Greek audience of the fifth century BC one can only judge by proxy. However, through a close examination of the original Greek text one can have a good guess at the histrionics of pain and suffering contained in Sophocles' highly performative language, which titillates its audience with continuous promises of breaking the canon of decency and bringing violence and terror to the fore. There is such

*During the preceding speech Beautician has wheeled the trolley over to the General, knelt to pull down his jogging-pants, revealing a urine-bag strapped to his leg, drained the bag into a jug and pulled the pants back up again. On his last line he grips her by the hair.*¹⁰⁷

Crimp's words arouse opposed feelings in us, conveying the same sense of cruelty and tenderness juxtaposed in the title of the play. The phallic-centred body of the General has indeed become one of those vulnerable and permeable Bakhtinian bodies discussed earlier in my analysis of Kane's *Phaedra's Love*.

As Escoda Agustí puts it, "Crimp deliberately portrays the General's body as a fluid surface. The sick, disordered body is actually grotesque by definition, because it is dependent and unsettles the distinction between inside and outside".¹⁰⁸ If, on the one hand, the agonising General relies on female compassion, on the other, his need for women's help does not prevent occasional outbursts of violence, a typical behaviour, as Goldstein points out in his study, of veterans with PTSD, who "may direct their aggression at the very women they depend on for care and connection".¹⁰⁹

The demise of the General's victimised body thus sanctions the gradual unsexing and parallel dissolution of the hero's masculinity and its progressive conflation with the feminine. In her fascinating study *Becoming Female: The Male Body in Greek Tragedy* (2008), Katrina Cawthorn argues that this process of unmaking virility and re-gendering the hero – well exemplified by the transformative suffering experienced by Heracles in Sophocles's *Trachiniae* – is a typical feature of classical Athenian tragedy:

richness in the modality of speaking atrocity, in the word-scapes of violence, which are always related to the authenticity of testimony – that of an actual eye- or ear-witness – but also raise expectations for a possible visual disclosure directly for the audience. [...] What is obvious [...] is that, being fully aware of the protocols of censorship, Sophocles still finds way to overcome the limitations of visual representation by verbally manipulating the voyeuristic drives of his audience and catering for their imagination in an affective way". Sakellaridou, p. 366.

¹⁰⁷ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 52.

¹⁰⁸ Escoda Agustí, *Martin Crimp's Theatre*, p. 254.

¹⁰⁹ Goldstein, p. 262.

One of the primary or iconic models of the body produced in tragedy is that of the fatally feminised, suffering male body, wounded, bleeding, altered in form from the pure masculine. The male body morphs into a feminised body via tragedy's discourses and actions.¹¹⁰

More generally, therefore, the metamorphosis of the warrior-hero tells us something interesting about the rewriting process and the theatrical nature of gender. In their appropriations of the tragic narrative featuring Heracles and Deianira, both Sophocles and Crimp indeed maintain and explore the archetypal gender(ed) split necessary to prosecute war without crystallising the inherently protean, fluid, and performative notion of gender, which is particularly prone to be re-written, re-staged, and re-negotiated.

5. INTERNATIONAL WAR(S): MEDIATISED TERROR IN THE AGE OF GLOBALISATION

As we have seen in this chapter, *Cruel and Tender* revolves around the ongoing dialogue between personal and public war(s). Examining the relationship between the play and the sociopolitical context in which it has been commissioned, written and produced, this section shifts its focus from the domestic microcosm wherein the marital conflict takes place to the international macrocosm staging the war against terror – a contemporary monster that Crimp compares to a mythological creature: “What else is the Hydra – the multi-headed snake which, for every head Heracles severed, grew two in its place – but a strange foreshadowing of terrorism?”¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ Katrina Cawthorn, *Becoming Female: The Male Body in Greek Tragedy* (London: Duckworth, 2008), p. 9.

¹¹¹ Crimp, “Sophocles and the War against Terror”. In *Cruel and Tender*, the General makes the same parallel: “for every head I have ever severed / two have grown in their place / and I have had to cut and to cut and to cut / to burn and to cut to purify the world” (p. 58).

Crimp's response to the global war against the twenty-first-century Hydra produced various pieces of writing. We might even argue that, in a sense, the British dramatist second-guessed the effects and affects of terror by exploring a fear-ridden culture well before 9/11. By some strange coincidence, *Fewer Emergencies* – the short drama giving its title to the trilogy which premiered at the Royal Court in 2005 – was written on 10 September 2001, “one of those very rare days when writing seems effortless. [...] The following day the twin towers in New York were destroyed”.¹¹² After the 9/11 attacks, when the US President George W. Bush declared a war on terror and subsequently invaded Iraq in March 2003, British playwrights were united in their response to a pointless and imperialist military action. One of the results of this anti-Bush theatrical protest was *War Correspondence*, “a week of performances, poetry readings and platforms with free admission”¹¹³ organised by the Royal Court in April 2003, which included poems by Tony Harrison, a documentary piece by Caryl Churchill, short plays by Rebecca Prichard and Martin Crimp, and talks by journalists and scholars. *Advice to Iraqi Women*, the fiercely satirical piece presented by Crimp on this occasion, was also published in the *Guardian* on 12 April 2003 and “performed again for another special event, the Royal Court's *A Royal Welcome*, which coincided with the American President's London visit in November 2003”.¹¹⁴

Bush's (and Blair's) War on Terror, as John Ginman observes, “provok[ed] a significant body of theatre work in London”,¹¹⁵ exemplified by Nicholas Hytner's

¹¹² Quoted in Sierz, p. 68.

¹¹³ Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp*, p. 121.

¹¹⁴ Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp*, p. 121.

¹¹⁵ John Ginman, “*Cruel and Tender: Metaphysics and Performance in a Time of Terror*”, *Western European Stages*, 16 (2004), pp. 113-8 (p. 113).

modern-day adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V*,¹¹⁶ performed at the National Theatre in 2003, and by some verbatim documentary plays, including Richard Norton-Taylor's *Justifying War: Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry* and Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo's *Guantánamo: 'Honor Bound to Defend Freedom'* – respectively staged at the Tricycle Theatre in 2003 and 2004 – as well as David Hare's *Stuff Happens*, presented at the National Theatre in 2004.

Even more interestingly, the Iraq war years were marked by an unexpected, parallel revival of Greek tragedy and a special interest in Euripides's drama, demonstrated by Katie Mitchell's production of *Iphigenia at Aulis* at the National Theatre (2004) and by two versions of *Hecuba*, the first at the Donmar Warehouse in 2004 and the second – a Royal Shakespeare Company's production based on Tony Harrison's translation and starring Vanessa Redgrave – performed at the Albery Theatre in 2005. Critics tend to consider Crimp's rewriting as part of this wider reaction to the War on Terror, as Nicholas de Jongh writes in his review of *Cruel and Tender*:

Classical Greek tragedy is all the rage just now in London, with four major productions impending. The reason for the resurgence of these ancient, mainly forgotten plays, as Crimp's mordant adaptation makes apparent, has surely to do with realisation of how close to those ancient worlds we have come in the last war-laden three years. The barbarous warfare and murders, the terrorising and violence of Aeschylean, Euripidean and Sophoclean drama now strike familiar chords.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁶ "Several of William Shakespeare's plays are set in a time of war, but especially in the second tetralogy war is the central motif. Its final play *Henry V* (1599) has long been regarded as the 'benchmark war play' in English-language theatre. Many of the succeeding plays can be traced to the exemplary portrait of an ideal sovereign and warlord who became a model for war literature in general [...]. Until the 1940s, Henry has been regarded as a heroic fighter in England's service; the patriotic content rendering *Henry V* especially attractive in times of political crises. Only since the Second World War has it often been reinterpreted as an anti-war play". Julia Boll, *The New War Plays: From Kane to Harris* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 22.

¹¹⁷ Nicholas de Jongh, *Evening Standard*, 14 May 2004; *Theatre Record*, vol. XXIV, no. 10 (2004), p. 632.

It can hardly be denied that *Cruel and Tender* grew out of the zeitgeist and “[o]bviously [...] needed the war in Iraq to make it happen”.¹¹⁸ However, despite the close relationship between the play and its sociopolitical frame, this drama should not be regarded as a purely polemical work about the tragic consequences of the Western invasion of Iraq: “We started working on this piece in 2003 and the War on Terror was in full swing, but I was concerned not to reduce the play to an anti-war diatribe”.¹¹⁹ For this reason, Crimp shifted the geo-political axis of his play from West-East to North-South by relocating the war-zone from the Middle East to the Rwandan city of Gisenyi (“I wanted to create an imaginative space for the audience”).¹²⁰ Thanks to its departures from the original (con)text and lack of specific references to current events, Crimp’s play, Angelaki suggests, “acquire[s] greater urgency through the range of issues it handles”¹²¹ and “hinders direct analogies for spectators, enabling a wider field of interpretation”.¹²²

Drawing on Sophocles and, at the same time, replacing the Iraq war with the Rwandan genocide,¹²³ Crimp seems to point out that, in our globalised and media-

¹¹⁸ Crimp quoted in *British Theatre of the 1990s: Interviews with Directors, Playwrights, Critics and Academics*, ed. by Mireia Aragay, Hildegard Klein, Enric Monforte, and Pilar Zozaya (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 60.

¹¹⁹ Crimp quoted in Sierz, p. 107.

¹²⁰ Interview with Crimp conducted by Cavendish.

¹²¹ Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp*, p. 124.

¹²² Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp*, p. 124.

¹²³ “[W]hen the dying General sees Laela, he says: ‘She thinks I’m a cockroach’ (p. 62), the term used for Tutsis by Hutus during the Rwandan genocide of the mid-1990s”. Sierz, p. 66. Interestingly, Boll draws a parallel with the Congolese atrocities: “Crimp transposes the war to Africa and specifically refers to Gisenyi in Rwanda (Crimp 4). And thus, far from being focused mainly on questions of family loyalty and private betrayal, the story of a warlord ruthlessly killing the inhabitants of a whole city because he lusts after the daughter of the local ruler becomes a portrayal of, simultaneously, the atrocities committed during the genocides in Rwanda and Congo and the often the questionable ‘blanket’ resolutions readily passed by Western countries involved in the war on terror. [...] The General displays similarities with the notorious Congolese rebel Laurent Nkunda: the son’s accusation ‘You have wiped people off this earth like a teacher rubbing out equations’ (57) may be read as a reference to Nkunda’s past as schoolteacher, as may be the accusations of leading child soldiers into battle (13)”. Boll, pp. 117-9.

ridden world, war becomes a universal and “palimpsestic”,¹²⁴ as Julia Boll would define it, phenomenon. In her recent *The New War Plays: From Kane to Harris* (2013), the German scholar indeed argues that contemporary adaptations of classical tragedies have the remarkable capacity “to highlight the parallels between the structures of ancient and contemporary warfare and thus demonstrate how the New Wars are, in fact, the return of something very old”.¹²⁵ The crossing of boundaries is what defines these (potentially never-ending) postmodern wars, which, as theorised by Mary Kaldor in *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (1999), are characterised by the deconstruction of a series of traditional dichotomies, “a blurring of the distinctions between war [...], organized crime [...] and large-scale violations of human rights”¹²⁶ and “between public and private, military and civil, internal and external, also call[ing] into question the distinction between war and peace itself”.¹²⁷

Contemporary global(ised) conflicts such as the War on Terror are also rooted in the world-wide proliferation and consumption of images celebrating the gruesome spectacle of war. Jenny Hughes observes that “[t]he performance-like, theatrical nature of war and terrorism”¹²⁸ has been noted by various commentators from different backgrounds. Among them, the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard stresses the theatrical nature of the terrorist attack in New York, enacted through the highly ‘spectacular’ collapse of the Twin Towers causing the death of over three thousand civilians: “it is the radicality of the spectacle, the brutality of the spectacle, which alone is original and irreducible. The spectacle of terrorism forces the terrorism

¹²⁴ Boll, p. 16.

¹²⁵ Boll, p. 10.

¹²⁶ Quoted in Boll, p. 13.

¹²⁷ Quoted in Boll, p. 15.

¹²⁸ Jenny Hughes, “Theatre, Performance and the ‘War on Terror’: Ethical and Political Questions Arising from British Theatrical Responses to War and Terrorism”, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17 (2007), pp. 149-164 (p. 150).

of spectacle upon us. [...] This is *our* theatre of cruelty, the only one we have left [...]”.¹²⁹ With their immediate transmission and global consumption, images become a powerful weapon sustaining a sophisticated war machinery:

the terrorists exploited the ‘real time’ of images, their instantaneous world-wide transmission, just as they exploited stock-market speculation, electronic information and air traffic. The role of images is highly ambiguous. For, at the same time as they exalt the event, they also take it hostage. They serve to multiply it to infinity and, at the same time, they are a diversion and a neutralization [...]. The image consumes the event, in the sense that it absorbs it and offers it for consumption. Admittedly, it gives it unprecedented impact, but impact as image-event.¹³⁰

The affective impact of war images played a crucial role in the genesis of *Cruel and Tender*. Before starting to rewrite Sophocles’s tragedy, Crimp collected and carefully examined photographs of contemporary wars. The fact that the three pictures selected by Crimp show different conflicts confirms the epidemic, endless, and stratified nature of postmodern warfare. Crimp’s relocated, globalised, and multi-layered war thus results from the conflation of past and present atrocities and blends old with new suffering. In “Sophocles and the War against Terror”, the British dramatist provides an accurate and affectively charged semiotic reading of the photographic documents forming his visual palimpsest, which is worth quoting at length:

I began by collecting photographs. In one, a Liberian ‘government commander’ – a boy of about 20 – leaps into the air with an enormous smile to camera as if he’s just scored a goal, rather than fired a rocket-propelled grenade. In the foreground, next to the spent cartridges, a blue flip-flop. In another an American soldier ‘carries an Iraqi child from a house in a dawn raid’. The soldier, whose eyes are lowered in concentration and who seems – oddly – to be wearing rimless glasses, has one arm round a small crying boy. At the centre of the black doorway, and of the photograph, is the soldier’s red glove. In a third a woman runs along a Sarajevo pavement – from what? sniper fire? mortar rounds? – while a UN soldier takes aim with his rifle at some threat out of the frame. The woman’s clothes are tight to her skin: even her hair is up, exposing her neck; conversely, the man’s body is covered and distorted by the armour of war:

¹²⁹ Jean Baudrillard, “The Spirit of Terrorism”, in *The Spirit of Terrorism and Other Essays*, trans. by Chris Turner (London and New York: Verso, 2012 [2002]), p. 23 [original emphasis].

¹³⁰ Baudrillard, p. 21.

helmet like Don Quixote's shaving bowl changing the shape of his head, torso boxed in by a flak-jacket. This photo articulates the gender roles universally required to prosecute war. The man is specially trained and specially dressed to legitimate killing (a job for which evidence shows men to be biologically little better equipped than women), while the woman stays rooted in and helps to define the civilian world.¹³¹

Crimp's photographic analysis articulates the affective potential of these pictures by focusing on the body language of the subjects and the domesticity of war violence. The banality of atrocity is indeed mirrored by the evocativeness of some everyday objects such as an abandoned flip-flop, a red glove or the female clothes of a war victim. Aptly, Sakellaridou suggests that Crimp's technique is very similar to that of contemporary anthropologists such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes, who have adopted a new approach to the examination of violence, "especially the hidden sides of quotidian violence and its causes. Her reported examples and suggestions very often reflect Crimp's own preliminary stages of research and affective engagement with his topic".¹³² Moreover, it is worth noting that, in Crimp's opinion, the third picture perfectly exemplifies the impact of gender(ed) roles on warfare, a vision that he borrows from Sophocles and re-works in his contemporary appropriation of the Greek tragedy.

In this case, images are an invaluable reference tool helping us to investigate the effects and affects of war in our media-ridden age, but, at the same time, they can become dangerous weapons. The unleashed proliferation and consumption of replicas can indeed legitimise war violence and filter real events, preventing the viewer, who is overwhelmed by visual inputs, from interpreting them. As Baudrillard puts it, "[t]here is

¹³¹ Crimp, "Sophocles and the War against Terror".

¹³² Sakellaridou, p. 369. On Nancy Scheper-Hughes's anthropological approach, see her "Sacred Wounds: Making Sense of Violence", in *Theatre and Violence*, ed. by John W. Frick (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), pp. 7-30.

no ‘good’ use of the media; the media are part of the event, they are part of the terror”.¹³³

In Cruel and Tender, Crimp stages the political overtones of this manipulative use of communication through the figure of the spin doctor Jonathan, a government minister who constantly lies and distorts reality. Moreover, towards the end of the play, the shell-shocked General is obsessed with cameras, the only medium able to immortalise the grandeur of his past labours:

(*softly*) I killed the Nemean lion
oh yes—
with these hands—with these hands—
and the dog
and the dog with the three heads
I collected it from hell in front of the cameras
I have visited the dead in front of the cameras—
remember?
(*Points to himself proudly.*) *Kallinikos. Kallinikos.*¹³⁴

In keeping with this, the final scene of the play effectively blends contemporary mediatisation with ancient motifs. Just before his capture, the General insistently asks Jonathan about the presence of cameras and gods outside the house:

GENERAL: And are there cameras?
JONATHAN: Of course there are cameras.
GENERAL: Ask.
JONATHAN: What?
GENERAL: Ask.
JONATHAN (*into mobile*): Hello?—yup—listen: he wants to know if there are cameras...okay, okay...excellent...(to General) Yes, there are cameras—lots of cameras behind the steel fence—cameras / and lights.
GENERAL: And the gods?
JONATHAN (*to General*): What?
GENERAL: And the gods? Will the gods be watching?
IOLAOS: The gods are always watching, General.
GENERAL: Ask. (*Slight pause.*) ASK THEM.

¹³³ Baudrillard, p. 24.

¹³⁴ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 58. As Crimp explains in a note, *Kallinikos* – an epithet traditionally applied to Heracles – means ‘Glorious victor’.

JONATHAN (*into mobile*): Okay...Now he wants to know...Listen: he wants to know about the gods—gods, the gods—yup yup yup yup, obviously. (*to General*) The gods will be watching: you have my word.¹³⁵

Playing with classical echoes, this scene illustrates the typical strategies of Jonathan's ambiguous communication and the warlord's obsession with the media exposure of his public persona. The government minister distractedly coordinates the General's arrest while speaking on the phone and displays friendliness even when he ridicules the General, a mentally disturbed veteran charged with war crimes who – after all – is merely a victim of his political masters:

And I will explain into the microphones
that my labours are at an end
that what I have done
is what I was instructed to do
and what I was instructed to do
was to extract terror like a tooth from its own stinking gums.¹³⁶

Jonathan's duplicity is even more obvious when the spin doctor gives his (unreliable) word. If, on the one hand, the General's question "Will the gods be watching?" might seem "anachronistic",¹³⁷ on the other, letting the classical shine through, it may suggest a parallel between the omnipresent eye of the camera and the omnipotent/omniscient eye of ancient gods, for whom there is no place in our consumer society lacking moral principles. As Ginman suggests, *Cruel and Tender* "implies that we, the viewing public, and the media corporations that package data for us ultimately bear the responsibility for creating, and continuing to create, the values, public and private, by which we try to live".¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, pp. 66-67.

¹³⁶ Crimp, *Cruel and Tender*, p. 67.

¹³⁷ Ginman, p. 117.

¹³⁸ Ginman, p. 117.

6. MARTIN CRIMP'S POLITICS OF REWRITING

As argued in this chapter, Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* both adopts and adapts Sophocles's *Women of Trachis* by largely respecting the architecture of the source and, at the same time, radically reworking and updating various elements of the hypotext. In doing so, the British dramatist interweaves today's obsessions and ancient echoes in a highly original and effective way, "maintain[ing] a balance between classical and contemporary as its timely critique and engagement with current affairs take advantage of the enduring relevance of Greek tragedy".¹³⁹ In line with its source, focusing on the original fractures (and intersections) between the feminine and the masculine and drawing a striking parallel between marriage and war, *Cruel and Tender* articulates the gender(ed) roles universally required to sustain the war machinery and encourage violence in both the public sphere and the private dimension. Therefore, the play constantly oscillates between macro- and micro-politics, showing how large-scale actions have domestic reverberations and vice versa.

Even if *Cruel and Tender* is inspired by the War on Terror, it deliberately avoids explicit references to current events. This approach is quintessentially Crimpian, in that it revels in elusiveness. Crimp is indeed a writer who stimulates his audience

without ever delivering any ready-made and final answers. He dares to challenge social conventions, avoiding a mere demonization of the abusers, and trying to understand their dark sides and often miserable backgrounds. The playwright never offers easy solutions to complex issues. Instead, he explores the most disturbing aspects of human nature and stages them by breaking taboos and fostering a broad debate.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp*, p. 123.

¹⁴⁰ Maria Elena Capitani, "Blurring Ethical Boundaries: (Im)moral Ambiguity in Martin Crimp's Characters", *Performing Ethos: An International Journal of Ethics in Theatre and Performance*, 2 (2011), pp. 65-68 (p. 67).

As a result, critics find Crimp's output ambiguous and compelling and tend to argue that he is not a political writer in the traditional sense, since he does not have a clear-cut political agenda. However, Angelaki makes clear, this does not mean that his plays are characterised by a lack of "political sensibility, or that Crimp himself is socially detached – far from it. Rather, he conceptualizes the political differently: his tools are not what we might expect, not social realism, verbatim, docudrama, agitprop, or even conventional satire".¹⁴¹ As demonstrated by this chapter, Crimp's subtle approach to the politics of rewriting and to politics *strictu sensu* is well exemplified by *Cruel and Tender*. Creating a palimpsest laden with intertextual echoes and able to blur geopolitical boundaries, the playwright provides his audience with a provocative theatrical product whose 'displaced' politics "achieves a resonance which has the potential, like the material that inspired this adaptation, to endure".¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp*, p. 121.

¹⁴² Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp*, p. 126.

CONCLUSION

Is tragedy dead today? Without any doubt, George Steiner would say yes, insistently reaffirming the thesis articulated in his 1961 book, which solemnly announced the demise of the noblest literary and dramatic form. Despite his reactionary approach and dogmatic tone, if we consider tragedy as an absolute, non-negotiable structure adhering to a number of cardinal principles as Steiner does, we can understand why he argues that the most prestigious dramatic genre, in its highest rendition, no longer exists (or – at least – is extremely rare). However, the inherent capacity of tragedy – and of theatre in general – to reinvent itself throughout centuries is highly revealing about a natural resilience typical of this art form, which should not be overlooked. As Margherita Laera observes,

[t]heatre returns, it always does. [...] Theatre also rewrites. It constantly does. [...] Above all, theatre repeats, and incessantly so. It repeats itself and the act of returning and rewriting, as though it were struck by an obsessive compulsion to reiterate and re-enact, again and again, the vestiges of its past. In so doing, it adapts itself to present contingencies and situations, like an animal species struggling to survive through evolution.¹

The theatrical urge to self-reiterate is not the mere result of a survival instinct. Rather, Laera adds, it highlights the two-way relationship between theatre and the society in which it is produced, as well as the transformative power of this medium: “Theatre [...] does not reshape its coordinates simply to remain alive or to remain itself through time, but also to change the world around it. Theatre, one could say, never stops adapting its features to the world and the world to its features”.²

¹ Margherita Laera, “Introduction: Return, Rewrite, Repeat: The Theatricality of Adaptation”, in *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat*, ed. by Margherita Laera (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), pp. 1-17 (p. 1).

² Laera, p. 1.

The extraordinary ability of theatre to re-present itself by re-figuring its past relics and adapting its conventions to current affairs helps us to understand the permanence – and proliferation – of re-(en)visioned forms of tragedy on the contemporary stage. I agree with Sarah Annes Brown when she associates tragedy with “a dynamic of transition”.³ Tragedy is indeed a more permeable and fluid form than we usually think, which – “work[ing] at the limits of representation”⁴ – constantly deconstructs its well-established structure by transgressing its own boundaries. Besides, this protean genre seems to have been enhanced by moments of historical transition and crisis, holding a mirror to cultural, social, and political mutations (and even second-guessing future changes).

This multi-faceted process of transition, migration, and re-definition of tragedy is demonstrated by the three case studies analysed in this thesis, which exemplify some of the innumerable and unexpected forms that ancient tragedy can assume today. Sarah Kane’s *Phaedra’s Love* provides a striking instance of generic cross-pollination, intermingling the tragic with the comic and the grotesque. If this rewriting of Seneca’s *Phaedra* – defined as a comedy by Kane herself – blends seemingly irreconcilable genres, Aeschylus’s *Prometheus Bound* undergoes an inter-semiotic transformation, being rewritten in verse for the screen by Tony Harrison. Last but not least, Sophocles’s hypotext *Women of Trachis* is dis-placed in a (liminal) Western setting by Martin Crimp, who – in John Ginman’s words – “creates a problem play rather than a tragedy”.⁵

³ Sarah Annes Brown, “Introduction: Tragedy in Transition”, in *Tragedy in Transition*, ed. by Sarah Annes Brown and Catherine Silverstone (Malden (MA), Oxford, and Victoria: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 1-15 (p. 1).

⁴ Catherine Silverstone, “Afterword: Ending Tragedy”, in *Tragedy in Transition*, pp. 277-86 (p. 278).

⁵ John Ginman, “*Cruel and Tender*: Metaphysics and Performance in a Time of Terror”, *Western European Stages*, 16 (2004), pp. 113-8 (p. 117).

In their re-figurations of the tragic form, these British authors adopt different approaches. Commissioned by the Gate Theatre, Kane's dis-memberment of Seneca's tragedy and re-memberment of a body of hypotexts, including post-classical European sources, is probably the most radical of the three rewritings examined in this dissertation. Originating from a declared antipathy (and prejudice) towards Greek and Roman classics, Kane's visceral and disruptive reaction to her ancient referents is mainly affective. Even so, the instinctive quality of Kane's (re)writing should not lead critics to diminish the talent of a visionary young writer, who pushed theatrical limits to the extreme, challenging the notion of representation itself. By contrast, Harrison's appropriation of the Titan's myth considerably benefits from the author's classical background and deep interest in ancient literatures, which enable him to rework the source in a very accurate and, at the same time, highly original fashion. Transposing a theatrical product to cinema through poetry, Harrison's film/poem *Prometheus* is undoubtedly the most experimental and ambitious of my case studies. It might be argued that Crimp's rewriting method is halfway between Kane's and Harrison's approaches: even if *Cruel and Tender* is a commissioned theatrical work which does not spring from a strong personal interest in Graeco-Roman sources, Crimp reacts to Sophocles's tragedy by finding a balance between antiquity and contemporaneity, which are fruitfully interwoven throughout the play. Reframing and refracting the mythical narrative of Heracles and Deianira through an extensive research process, Crimp offers a highly resonant contemporary re-vision that comments on current affairs by re-figuring the past.

Despite the differences among the approaches of these three British authors to the classical and their own stylistic peculiarities, it is important to note that *Phaedra's*

Love, Prometheus, and Cruel and Tender share common features and concerns. Oscillating between the personal and the public, the local and the global, these contemporary re-interpretations of the myth carry (more or less explicit) socio-political overtones. Re-(en)visioning the classics through the lens of Romanticism and Marxism, Harrison's *Prometheus*, which – for Edith Hall – “offers the most important adaptation of classical myth for a radical purpose for years”,⁶ is clearly the most overtly political of my case studies. Even if, at first glance, Harrison's filmic reworking of the story of the philanthropic Titan does not have much in common with Kane's dramatic appropriation of the tale of Phaedra and Hippolytus, both writers – as Hallie Rebecca Marshall notes – “engage with issues of class, though in different ways, and the ever expanding ramifications of those structures in post-Thatcherite England, spreading from the destruction of individual family units to more pervasive issues of social decay”.⁷ In a similar fashion, Crimp's *Cruel and Tender* stages the erosion of the marriage between Amelia and the General under the increasing pressure of both private and public conflicts. If the journey of Prometheus repeatedly crosses British boundaries, Kane's and Crimp's rewritings convey a similar sense of displacement. Despite its veiled allusions to the scandals surrounding the House of Windsor, apart from a couple of references to Britain, *Phaedra's Love* is characterised by a lack of geographical specificity, enhancing the potential of the play to achieve wider resonance. The same can be said of *Cruel and Tender*, a drama which is vaguely set in a temporary home close to an international airport, a typical non-place of our globalised society.

⁶ Edith Hall, “Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*: A View from the Left”, *Arion*, 10 (2002), pp. 129-40 (p. 129).

⁷ Hallie Rebecca Marshall, “Saxon Violence and Social Decay in Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* and Tony Harrison's *Prometheus*”, *Helios*, 38 (2011), pp. 165-79 (p. 169).

The constant crossing and blurring of different kinds of boundaries and the fruitful interplay between national and transnational concerns pervading these rewritings seem to derive (and simultaneously stress) the permeability, malleability, universality, and timelessness of the classics, those vestiges of the Western past which maintain their relevance and poignancy in today's culture. Obviously, this thesis has not aimed to cover all the multi-faceted aspects of the rewriting phenomenon in contemporary British theatre, and the three case studies examined here merely serve as significant examples of textual reworking and cultural transmigration specially written, staged or screened between 1996 and 2004, as I explain in my Preface.

Indeed, in light of this chronological purview, before concluding, it might be interesting to expand slightly my focus in order to offer some final remarks on the current proliferation of Greek drama on the British stage. In this respect, 2015 – the year in which the threat of a 'Grexit' from the EU became more concrete than ever – was undeniably an *annus mirabilis* for Greek tragedy in Britain. On 5 July 2015, the day of the Greek referendum to accept the bailout conditions imposed by the European Commission, the IMF and the European Central Bank, Dan Rebellato wrote:

[...] in British theatre, we have the opposite. We have a Greentrance. 2015 looks likely to be the year of the Greeks. The Almeida has just opened Robert Icke's re-telling of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. It's following that up with *The Bacchae* and *Medea*, a reworked *Lysistrata* and a one-off performance of the whole of Homer's *Iliad*. *The Iliad* is also going to be the given epic theatrical shape by Mike Pearson for the National Theatre of Wales. There's a re-working of *Medea* at The Gate, who gave us the faux-classical *Idomoneus* [*sic*] last year. We've had the classical tragedy of *A View from the Bridge* in the West End already this year. There are *Oresteias* also at Shakespeare's Globe and Home Manchester and rumours of another coming from National Theatre of Scotland. The Unicorn also has a 'Greek season' with retellings of the Minotaur and Odysseus myths.⁸

⁸ Dan Rebellato, "Enter the Greeks", personal website (available at <http://www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2015/7/5/enter-the-greeks>, last accessed 13 January 2016).

In addition, at the end of the summer, a new *Hecuba* by Marina Carr, one of Ireland's leading playwrights, was staged at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon. At present, this classical burgeoning shows no sign of abating. Following successful runs in Cardiff and Edinburgh, the Welsh dramatist Gary Owen's reworking of the Iphigenia myth, entitled *Iphigenia in Splott*, will premiere at the National Theatre's Temporary Theatre on 27 January 2016. In June 2016, at the Barbican Theatre, the celebrated French actress Isabelle Huppert will play the role of a twenty-first-century Phaedra in a drama based on Kane's *Phaedra's Love* and incorporating extracts from J. M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, as well as new material from the Lebanese-Canadian playwright Wajdi Mouawad, adapted and directed by Krzysztof Warlikowski.

This amount of British productions, adaptations, and more or less radical rewritings of ancient sources gives a sense of the substantial impact of Greek tragedy on twenty-first-century British stage. Yet, even if this remarkable phenomenon seems quite extraordinary, it is not completely unusual. Rather, this revival is something that happens cyclically, as the classicist Emma Cole has observed during a recent debate at the Gate Theatre about re-interpreting the classics for the contemporary stage.⁹ In the first half of 1995, for instance, more Euripides was performed in London than Shakespeare. Ten years later, a new wave of Greek tragedies was the theatrical response to George W. Bush's declaration of the War on Terror.¹⁰ What is probably different today, Cole suggests, is the shift of focus from war plays to epic narratives (e.g. various *Medeas* linking back to the myth of Jason and the Argonauts and many *Oresteias*, as well as live readings of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*). Therefore, the urge to go back to

⁹ Christopher Haydon and Emma Cole, "Reimagining Classics", Gate Debate with Classics Scholar Emma Cole, 27 November 2015 (available at <http://www.gatetheatre.co.uk/blog/2015/11/gate-debate-with-classics-scholar-emma-cole>, last accessed 13 January 2016).

¹⁰ See the Introduction to this thesis, pp. 29-32.

ancient Greece, the cradle of Western civilisation, seems to be a recurring impulse. In this endless cycle, every journey back to classical Athens and to the roots of theatre is a new experience which provides us with illuminating insights:

Whenever we think about theatre we always reinvent the theatre. It's not as if there are permanent and unambiguous features of Greek plays that we always return to. Every visit to Ancient Greece, we see it with fresh eyes, find new things, pull out new features and find new parts of those plays and that world that resonate for us.¹¹

Strangely enough, this need to look back and the consequent explosion of Greek tragedies in contemporary British theatre does not seem to have aroused much scholarly interest, as I have pointed out in the Introduction. While, in recent years, some monographs have been devoted to the impact of Greek tragic drama on contemporary German, American, Irish, and African stages, in Britain, theatres and theatre critics are more attracted by the classical invasion than academics. This fact is not easy to explain, considering that the phenomenon is still far from receding into history, and – at this stage – we can only try to formulate some hypotheses. I would suggest that this lack of scholarly output is revealing about an ambiguous British attitude towards the classical canon. On the one hand, it can hardly be denied that today's British stage is highly receptive to classical archetypes; however, on the other, it is important to bear in mind that, compared to the explosion and prominence of new writing (the driving force of British contemporary theatre), the practice of rewriting is a minor phenomenon. Though, in June 2016, the Barbican Theatre will stage Krzysztof Warlikowski's appropriation of the myth of Phaedra based on Kane's *Phaedra's Love*, British theatre critics and audiences are far more excited about the first major revival on a London stage of Kane's 'original' play *Cleansed* (1998), directed by Katie Mitchell, which will

¹¹ Rebellato, personal website.

be first presented at the National Theatre on 16 February 2016. This closing example may demonstrate how, despite having conquered their place in contemporary British theatre, ancient tragedies in revised form do not constitute a major contender to, nor do they hinder the vitality of new writing. Instead, they constitute a further voice contributing to the polyphony of a dramatic and theatrical tradition which, even in times of crisis, has not lost its immense creative potential.

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