

Baldi's Oresteia Rides Again: *Il Pistolero dell'Ave Maria* (1969) as Euripidean Electra

Ferdinando Baldi's 1969 *Il Pistolero dell'Ave Maria* flies well beneath the radar of most cinematic historians. Brunetta's *History of Italian Cinema* (Princeton 2009), as one example of many, mentions neither film nor its director at all. The film's translations lurk vaguely behind generic titles, *The Forgotten Pistolero*, *Tierra de gigantes*, *Le dernier des salauds*, *Seine Kugeln pfeifen das Todeslied*. Though available for Amazon.com streaming, the film is otherwise hard to obtain in the States. American classicists are unlikely to stumble upon this adaptation of the Orestes myth.

The film's summary in the ANICA Archivio del Cinema Italiano rightly observes that Baldi's film "*non genericamente ma con precisi riferimenti richiama un antico mito, e precisamente all'Orestiade ... [e] le situazioni e i personaggi che insanguinarono la casa di Agamennone.*" Max Goldman in a CAMWS 2014 panel on Aeschylaeian nachleben treated the film as "Aeschylus' Forgotten Pistolero".

Numerous points of thematic contact invite discussion of westerns as usages of Greek tragedy broadly. In the case of Baldi's *Pistolero dell'Ave Maria*, closer interpretive precision is warranted. So many similarities connection this film to Euripides' *Electra* that Baldi's story could not possibly have come from out of thin air. Its screenplay, by Vincenzo Cerami, Baldi himself, and others, bears remarkable similarity to Euripides' peculiar plot.

As in Euripides' *Electra*, a girl has grown up under the emotional burden of seeing her father murdered by her adulterous mother and her lover. Now a once noble, still beautiful young woman is bound in an unconsummated marriage to an economically repressed and less-than-handsome man. She awaits the return of her brother, who vanished on the night of father's murder; she exists on emotional nourishment through dedication at the father's tomb. Isabel is

fully ripened for revenge against the tyrants in her household and certainly ready to submit to a real husband. As in Euripides' most remarkable *deus ex machina*, where Electra is promised recuperative oblivion in wedded bliss with Pylades: τοῖσδε μελήσει γάμος (Eur. *El.* 1342), Baldi sends his Pylades and Electra into a new dawn on one horse, his Orestes on another.

Adaptation Theory, as articulated by Hutcheon, calls for Baldi or his cinematic narrative to acknowledge overtly the connection to the Euripidean source. Although *Il Pistolero dell'Ave Maria*'s screenplay rests firmly upon the foundation of Euripides' plot, still so much diverges from Euripidean precedent that the screenplay is very much *sui generis*. If there is an overt allusion to the Orestes myth anywhere within the film — a character's name, a visual reference in the *mise en scene*, or the like — it lurks furtively, essentially lost. Absent an overt acknowledgement of its intertextual source, this film challenges one of the qualifying characteristics for successful adaptations for Hutcheon.

Baldi's *Pistolero* contributes a remarkable element to the Oresteia tradition. Theoretically, however, like Jonathan Demme's *Manchurian Candidate* (2004), which preserved none of the Orestes matter that identified its cinematic (Frankenheimer 1962) and literary (Condon 1959) forebears, Baldi's *Pistolero dell'Ave Maria* suggests that it may be unaware of its intertextual descent. The film tells a cracking good story of revenge, but it is more interesting as a test case for ground rules of adaptation and reception of classical mythology in the arts. This issue is the particular focus of my paper.

In all, 29 films comprise Baldi's (d. 2007) *oeuvre* from 1952 until 1988. In a full career that spun 29 films, Baldi's early work in cinema includes two *peplum* films, i.e. the non-classical *Divide e Golia* (1960) but the overtly classical *Orazi e Curiazi* (1961). His comic *Il Figlio di Cleopatra* (1964) and historical adventures, such as *Il Massacro della Foresta Nera* (1966) and

*All'Ombra delle Aquile* (1966) suggest an abiding interest in classical plots before his 1969 *Oresteia*. Because little scholarship has been published on Baldi and his usage of classical literature, the *Pistolero* remains an intriguing opportunity to explore an apparent restriction of adaptation theory.

Given the ready accessibility of Euripides' *Electra* among classical plots, and coupled with that the fact that Cacoyannis had adapted Euripides' play in his now-classic *Electra* (1962), the likelihood of Baldi's yielding to impulse in the creation of his *Pistolero* would seem high. But, does the film *count* as an adaptation of the Orestes myth? The puzzle remains: What does Baldi gain by not overtly nodding to the source text? Why does he alter the plot so dramatically in Anna's actual role especially? Baldi himself, to my knowledge, does not address these questions.