

Broadway, Hip-Hop, and Aeschylus: Teaching Greek Drama in Modern U. S. High Schools

It has been a growing struggle for teachers of classical languages and cultures in modern U.S. high schools to connect with students in terms of understanding the text and structure of Greek drama. This paper grew out of my own experiences with the Latin 3 Honors class of Pinecrest Academy of the academic year 2016-2017. As part of their studies, they were required to work together to produce a classical drama, in translation, using underclassmen to round out the cast. They chose to adapt Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* for a contemporary audience. They struggled with understanding both the function of the Chorus' *Strophe/Anti-Strophe* back-and-forth as well as the content of these sections. It was when I finally hit upon the idea of comparing these sections to rap battles as in the extremely popular U. S. musical *Hamilton: An American Musical*, that the students finally understood the function. By putting these sections to music and turning them into a rap battle, the students began to really understand their context and textual relevance to the plot overall.

There are two major points of theory that I combined in a new way to address teaching classical drama to students. First, I argue that it is by producing and staging these plays as "musicals" that the audience is better able to understand the text and plot. Indeed, Amanda Wrigley showed in her text on performing Greek Drama, music has long been a useful tool in allowing the uninitiated audience to connect with the themes and text of the performance. (Wrigley 2011) I argue that the modern Western audience is uniquely primed to achieve greater understanding of new material through music. Music is the way many of our first lessons are taught.

The second major theory addresses which music best aids in teaching. I argue that using music that the audience is already familiar with allows the audience to gain a greater

understanding of the new words. This, in turn, allows the audience to more greatly understand the content of the play. By using the music from the popular experience, the audiences understanding increases based on the cultural consciousness of the music. This is why using the music of *Hamilton: An American Musical (Hamilton)*, primes the audience to expect a back-and-forth repartee during the Chorus' *Strophe/Anti-Strophe*. Lin-Manuel Miranda uses this same concept when he uses specific music selections to encourage his audience to expect a specific mood or feeling in his opus *Hamilton*. (Miranda and McCarter 2016)

Bibliography

- Miranda, Lin-Manuel and Jeremy McCarter. *Hamilton: The Revolution: Being the Complete Libretto of the Broadway Musical With a True Account of Its Creation*. New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016.
- Wrigley, Amanda. *Performing Greek Drama in Oxford and on tour with the Balliol Players*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2011.