

After the Violence: Modern Responses from Ancient Models

How to recover from or respond to acts of violence: more violence in return? civic punishment? amnesty for the perpetrators? The Greek stage has bequeathed to us a variety of possible models. In each of the three *Electra* plays, Orestes answers the murder of his father by killing his mother. Aeschylus and Euripides (in *Eumenides* and *Orestes* respectively) offer, in their different ways, resolution to that story. The battle at the gates of Thebes creates a bloodbath that results in Polynices rotting and Antigone hanging. Resolution there, at least in Sophocles, is a stack of bodies and a broken Creon.

In this paper, I consider two recent plays that adopt and adapt these Greek models for responding to violence: Yaël Farber's *Molora*, first performed in 2003 and published in 2008; and Moira Buffini's *Welcome to Thebes*, first performed and published in 2010. *Molora* is an *Electra* play transported to post-apartheid South Africa. A white Clytemnestra faces off against a black *Electra* in a setting meant to evoke the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings of the 1990s. The dialogue is in large part a *mélange* of quotations from the Greek treatments of the story, interspersed with stage action that brings the past into the present: Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon, *Electra* sends Orestes off to safety, Clytemnestra mistreats the grieving *Electra*. Central throughout is a chorus of elderly Xhosa women, all of them members of the Ngqoko Cultural Group, musicians committed to keeping alive the traditional songs and language of the rural Xhosa communities in South Africa. They comment on, and intrude into, the action of the play with traditional instruments and a unique form of split-tone singing. Toward the end of the play, Orestes returns, plots the two murders, but carries them out only partially. The play makes use of the cycle of vengeance in the House of Atreus to comment on

the miracle that was the TRC. While by no means perfect, the acts of the commission somehow prevented the vengeful violence that many expected with the end of apartheid.

Very different is Buffini's play. Her Thebes, under the leadership of Eurydice, is emerging from a brutal civil war and attempting to establish a democracy. Central to that attempt is the aid of Theseus, first citizen of the democratic Athens, who arrives in Thebes for a summit with Eurydice. Buffini describes the setting vaguely as "a city named Thebes, somewhere in the twenty-first century," but casting as well as the narrative itself place this Thebes somewhere in Africa. As the action unfolds, Buffini interweaves narratives from *Antigone*, *Bacchae*, and even *Hippolytus*. Polynices, instigator of inhuman brutality in this play, is found dead just as Theseus arrives. Even as Eurydice has established a truth and reconciliation commission of her own, and even as she tries to present her Thebes as a city worth Theseus' investment, she cannot overcome her personal revulsion at Polynices' deeds, and decrees that his body rot in public. Elsewhere in this Thebes, citizens testify about war crimes committed by those who now seek post-war political power; but they are silenced and resort to revenge rather than reconciliation.

These are two adaptations of Greek drama, then, that offer very different possibilities for responding to acts of violence. Farber has claimed that she wanted in her play to "express the miracle of ...[the post-apartheid] period in South Africa's history, and how it shined a light on what could be a real way forward for the rest of the world." Buffini's play in many ways extinguishes that light, or blocks that way forward. This paper will not choose between these two visions of human history or human nature. Rather it will attempt to illuminate these new uses of some of our old plays and our old stories as we all try to muddle forward together.

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