

Rewriting Greek Tragedy / Confronting History in Contemporary American Drama: David Rabe's *The Orphan* (1973) and Ellen McLaughlin's *The Persians* (2003)

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Ever since the late 1960s and early 1970s, a host of diverse American playwrights and directors have resorted to ancient Greek tragedy more intensely than their predecessors had ever done before. Varied in scope and aims as well as distinct in form and expression as these works have been, they have mainly served to re-contextualize the source material in their own present moment and their immediate sociocultural and political settings. Similar to what holds true for their forerunners,^[1] American rewrites of Greek tragedy of the last five decades highlight in multiple and inventive ways the “‘presentist’ dimension,” which, in Hugh Grady’s terms, underlies all ventures into “works of the past.”^[2] Furthermore, these modern plays also verify in practice the scholar’s argument that “the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, [and] Euripides . . . have never been mere exemplars of a later discourse on the tragic.”^[3] Specifically, they manage to do so as they reclaim those resources and particular qualities of classical tragedy by means of which artists and audiences alike are able to engage with issues of historical understanding.

In essence, contemporary American rewrites of Greek tragedy reaffirm in their own modes the close connections that the cultural form has perennially sustained with history on both a theoretical and a practical level. In her influential work on tragedy and modernity, Olga Taxidou insightfully stresses that history “forms one of the main structuring forces of tragic form” that has nonetheless “always occupied an ambiguous position in studies of tragedy.”^[4] The author elaborates on the findings of her research and proceeds to endorse in particular those “new ways of talking about tragic form that create historical accountability, radical critique and introduce the possibility of change.”^[5] It is precisely the possibility of such an accountability that fuels the aspirations in the two different plays studied in this article. Seeking to interrogate how this age-old and fertile dialogue between tragedy and history can be reclaimed in present-day terms, the discussion focuses on two works which undertake the exact same challenge while being separated from each other by four decades. In general terms, David Rabe’s *The Orphan* (1973) and Ellen McLaughlin’s *The Persians* (2003) are singled out here as objects of study precisely because they confront questions of historical perception which relate primarily to the US but also prove of great significance for the rest of the Western world during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

In particular the argument in this article develops around two distant, yet intricately related and highly critical moments in recent and contemporary American history. Simultaneously, attention is specifically dedicated to the fact that both plays were voiced within a sociocultural and political climate characterized

by a wide-spread and detrimental waning of historical understanding. First, *The Orphan* attracts interest as an experimental rewrite of Aeschylus's *The Oresteia* that seeks to dissect the multiple ways in which the Vietnam trauma was engendered by a seriously compromised sense of history that the war itself intensified even further. Second, *The Persians* is recognized as an innovative re-reading of the homonymous Aeschylean prototype which examines the implications of the Iraq War and inspects the ways in which the dissolution of historical awareness interrelates with specific policies and practices that postindustrial late capitalism dictates on global scale at present. It is indeed no surprise that the two plays examined here grapple with these issues over the same time span during which the crisis of historical sensibility became the primary focus of attention across different disciplines and for a large number of outstanding theorists and critics who vary from Henri Lefebvre and Fredric Jameson to David Harvey and beyond.^[6]

As a result, the discussion seeks to elucidate the inventive ways in which both Rabe's *The Orphan* and McLaughlin's *The Persians* recognize the practice of re-writing as an ongoing, constantly evolving process through which they test their own "poetic, rhetorical, and performative dimensions" that, as historian Dominick LaCapra argues when he discusses the contributions of art to historiography, "not only mark but also make differences historically."^[7] It is precisely for this reason that both plays return to Greek tragedy and aspire to reclaim it as a genuinely "conflictual *topos*" where, according to Taxidou's insightful schema, "the King does not simply and unproblematically stand for the state and its people but acts as a ruse through which the whole concept of power is questioned."^[8] In other words, what inspires the explorations of historical accountability in these two modern plays is the fact that classical tragedy acquired its political significance and resonance by being first and foremost an indispensable constituent to the very birth and growth of democracy.^[9] It is through this prism that both plays, similar to what scholar Sanja Bahun-Radunovi? notes about Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*, Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest*, and Suzan-Lori Parks's *The America Play*, address "one specific concern of the recent philosophy of history: the challenge to think history outside the traditional notion of (teleological, recorded) history of events, [and] yet not to deprive it of its human potential."^[10]

In this plane of inquiry, central questions revolve around the political efficacy of contemporary drama and theater. In particular, this article places emphasis on whether the two plays can serve as historiographical tools of an unconventional type by means of which instances of multisided crisis are adequately interrogated. Thus, what attracts attention is the role that these works prescribe or at least anticipate for the spectator. Indeed, the issue of spectatorship proves worth exploring since the two plays undertake—in terms analogous to those LaCapra outlines for professional historiography—an "investigation already inserted in an ongoing historical process, a positioning toward which one may attempt to acquire some transformative perspective or critical purchase."^[11]

In its effort to test the possibilities of such a "transformative perspective" on history, *The Orphan* recognizes the Aeschylean prototypical trilogy as an invaluable source of instruction. This third play in a series of four^[12]—originally produced between 1969 and 1976—that sought to document the aftermath of the Vietnam War and its impact on private landscapes as well as on the collective conscience of the American people, reaffirms in its own exceptional mode the fact that *The Oresteia* provides, more than anything else, incomparable guidance on how the dynamics of tragedy are simply unimaginable without the active engagement of the *polis* with everything that takes place in the *orchestra*. Indeed, this proves an acknowledgment of utmost significance for a play whose primary aim is to alert audiences to the fact that over the period of the late sixties and early seventies, in spite of the unprecedentedly

vigorous antiwar movement, the American public in large part chose to ignore the very actuality of war. In reviewing the moment, Rabe has poignantly remarked on several occasions that “people [in the US] were interested in simplifications, in the *debate* about the war rather than in the experience of the war itself.”^[13] Professionally produced for the first time in April of 1973, the play aspires to attract attention to a highly crucial aspect of a chapter of contemporary history that originally remained consequentially unaddressed. In the playwright’s own words, this is nothing less than the effort “to embrace a portion of that inherently unembraceable subject.”^[14]

Faced, thus, with the urgency of its own historical moment, *The Orphan* turns inventively towards the classical trilogy noted for its masterful response to the exact same task. As classicist Michael Walton explains, “Aeschylus’ central concerns . . . are contemporary to the Athens of his time, to the Council of the Areopagus, all but suppressed in 461 BC, and to the growth of democracy in fifth-century Athens.”^[15] It is important to note that *The Orphan* paves its own way by attuning carefully to the instruction it receives from the source text while also aptly exploiting a significant aspect of rewriting, what Julie Sanders terms “the pleasure principle, . . . the connected interplay of expectation and surprise.”^[16] In particular, the play takes a large number of major liberties with the prototype both on the thematic and the structural level and thus manages to reflect the atmosphere of confusion and indeterminacy prevalent in the US in the early seventies but also to question its own effort to address the specificity of the moment. First and foremost, the work proposes an unconventional chorus made up of multi-layered and transformational characters who inspect critically the *dramatis personae* drawn from the Aeschylean trilogy and at the same time interact with them directly. These essentially anonymous entities, noted as The Speaker, The Figure, The Girl, undergo a series of metamorphoses, evidently modelled upon the practices and transformation techniques of Joe Chaikin’s Open Theater, and encapsulate idiosyncratic stances as well as general attitudes prevalent in the US during the early seventies, particularly among young people.^[17] Furthermore, they specifically display reactions of the type that can be expected from the members of an experimental theater group working on the classical source text. Thus, they emerge as the main agents of a conscious theatricality through which the play interrogates its own position in history.

One of the first major questions the audience is invited to consider is concurrently and instructively pertinent on all these different levels of signification. The Speaker, outlined as “a young woman dressed elegantly [and] hold[ing] a flashlight and a microphone,”^[18] greets both the classical figures and the spectators in these words: “Think of time as a pool. Do we speak to the past? Or merely look at it? Is it right? Left? Up? Down?” (90). The great challenge of conversing with the past, whether distant or more recent, looms particularly intensely for the play itself but even more so for its enveloping sociocultural and political context. In the US of the early seventies, the multisided crisis of a nation unable to account for its own doings rendered questions regarding historical agency and responsibility both impossible and absolutely vital. It is precisely this pressing need for questions which remain consequentially unattended that the play stresses by rewriting the prototype in a thoroughly self-conscious mode.

Interest in the present discussion revolves around the validity of this historiographical attempt at a moment of crisis and thus what attracts particular attention are elements such as the distancing effect that informs Orestes’s effort to see himself within the overall course of tragic action and the employment of two distinct characters for Clytemnestra at two different moments in her life. As the twentieth-century anonymous characters invite both those onstage and those offstage to engage with the Aeschylean trilogy, emphasis is specifically placed on the ways and means through which one acquires an understanding of

one's own position in history, both as a subject and an object of it. Most of all, what the work highlights is the very notion of historical accountability. Thus, as the action in the first act accommodates fragments from the original source text, Clytemnestra Two tellingly asks Agamemnon to recognize the palpable trails of his own actions and at the same time discloses her own plans to intervene in the scheme of things as an active agent: "You smell of time gone, Agamemnon. It's time that you bathe. . . . You are filth and filth must bathe. Where's the net? We must have the net" (93). To the same end, Rabe attempts an extensive cross-fertilization between *Agamemnon*, the first part of the trilogy, and Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis*.^[19] The confrontation between the prototypical tragic heroine and hero unfolds thus in an unprecedented way and attention is carefully drawn once again to the issue of historical accountability: "but between this departure of Helen and our daughter's death, nothing real exists—do you see—unless you put it there" (108). Furthermore, the work seeks to interrogate the crisis of historicity that it witnesses for its own moment and thus it intently highlights the plea Clytemnestra One addresses to her husband: "Please find a way to lift us from this fate. I beg you, Agamemnon, think! Think! . . . Pride is your motive—vanity and power. The wind is your alibi and excuse" (116–17).

Undoubtedly, these are questions that prove urgent on the level of the collective and the political, and not on any exclusive or private terrain. This modern work courageously strives to reclaim and redefine in contemporary terms the qualities that made Greek tragedy, as Stathis Gourgouris argues, "especially well configured to place before the polity the event of its own *hubris*."^[20] Half-consciously, half-instinctively, through these loose and experimental rewriting techniques, *The Orphan* attempts to recast in late twentieth-century terms what Taxidou notes about the "spectacular, physical, collective, physiognomic (as Benjamin would call it) dimension of tragedy."^[21] Indeed, what incites the interrogations of historical accountability and the questions surrounding the well-being and integrity of the collective in this modern work is the recognition of the fact that in "the Athenian tragedies," as Grady insightfully stresses, "human alienation from the social and the natural is clearly in evidence, in fact, center-stage."^[22] The scholar elaborates on his point by noting characteristically that "Greek tragedy is always materialist-for-us," since "the difficulty of founding a stable sense of good and evil, of right and wrong, is as problematic for Orestes, Oedipus, Antigone, Creon, Pentheus, and Phaedra . . . as it is for us in the early twenty-first century."^[23]

In *The Orphan*, Orestes's *agon* serves to epitomize this precise type of problematics. At the end of act one, The Figure, "a man with a thick black beard [who] wears a T-shirt, Levi's jacket and jeans, and boots" (89) assumes the role or even the form of Apollo and foreshadows the action of the second act in these words: "It is time that Orestes arrive with his story . . . understanding nothing. . . . And it will not be his story that will matter, nor will it be his hatred, but only the knife" (124). Reflecting his parents, Orestes faces the insurmountable difficulty of making sense of his own position as a subject and an object of history, the very challenge of "founding a stable sense of good and evil."^[24] In other words, the play resorts to classical tragedy as a paradigmatic "conflictual *topos*"^[25] in an effort to interrogate the specificity of its own historical moment. To this end, particular emphasis is placed on the way Orestes questions the mission with which he has been assigned: "This is written, that is written. Who is doing all this writing?" (134). However, what proves definitely formative in his case is the set of questions his mother's plight highlights in act one and which are now dynamically reclaimed by him for the purposes of the second one: "What is my motive, which my alibi—what is my excuse?" (156). In this mode, *The Orphan* aspires to render possible on stage a *peripeteia* that unfolds concurrently both within the mythological topography of the original source text and the distinctive sociocultural and political geography of the US in the early 1970s. To this end, Pylades—who similarly to his classical counterpart

accompanies Orestes—provides both on-stage and off-stage audiences with a sharp account of Aegisthus’s ways and practices: “He wars against the Persians—he diverts our resources into a pointless struggle with the Peloponnesians. He slaughters the Vietnamese. . . . He burns their villages” (139). For the exact same reason, moments later, Pylades also delivers a short monologue which accommodates fragments of a penetrating, disarming narrative of the My Lai massacre and which materializes on stage in the form of a flash that cuts across the evolving main action (147).

The play articulates its own distinctive political statement by emphasizing primarily the adventurous course Orestes follows as he confronts a cosmos imbued with violence on all different counts. The questions with which the character struggles are pertinent to both the mythological Argos and the contemporary US and thus serve to define the qualities of this exceptional historiographical inquiry. The words with which Orestes addresses Iphigenia constitute a case in point:

Why our father killed you, and did your spirit move the wind? . . . I say there are certain things that, if I am to remain a human man, I must not ever cease to know them. What are they? Please tell me! Does no one want to help me? Does no one care what happens to poor Orestes fed so fucking long on bread and dreams he thinks that both are real! (158)

Interestingly enough, this singular *agon* develops within the boundaries of a realm noted for the presence of mostly young people who are fascinated with large-scale crime as well as hallucinatory experiences, and whose centerless quest for a way out of stagnation goes hand in hand with political causes that never become fully defined or adequately developed. Despite the fact that Orestes for most of the action in act two personifies the very effort to resist this force-field of pervasive violence and terminal confusion, he eventually surrenders to it. Thus, his own act of avenging his father’s murder becomes indistinguishable from occasions that either epitomize the general public’s obsession with the Charles Manson family murders, or merely reflect the dullness and anesthesia of drug abuse. Aided decisively by The Figure—who abruptly drops the mask of Manson to assume the role of Apollo—Orestes is led to pronounce himself innocent: “I thought I could not kill. I let fear run me all over the world, but I have caressed my demon, picked up my monster, and I know now I can kill and survive” (175–76). In the final scene of the play, tragic action proves an impossibility as Orestes rises to the sky not to be released but to remain suspended in mid-air. The character emerges now as a palpable symbol of cynical acceptance of violence but also of the very failure to oppose its force and question its far-reaching repercussions. In sharp contrast to his counterpart in Aeschylus’s trilogy, Orestes here attains no deliverance either for himself or the city. His *agon* culminates in a phase of absolute suspension and deterritorialization during which no future perspective is visible for the private, familial context and no opening can be envisioned either for the larger one of the collective conscience.

Evidently, *The Orphan* highlights the significance of this failure and impossibility so that the chronicle of a terribly missed opportunity can be adequately communicated to the audience. As the playwright himself sharply comments:

The Vietnam War . . . was the swamp where history paused and could have shown who were and who were becoming. In its flash and violence it was a probe into the depths, an X ray knifing open the darkness with an obscene illumination against whose eloquence we closed our eyes.[\[26\]](#)

On a surface level, the play as an unconventional historiographical attempt which turns critically towards classical tragedy and reviews its own moment, bridges the crucial gap that Terry Eagleton, in his uncommon genealogy of both tragedy and tragic theory, identifies in these words: “While the scholars have been speaking of tragedy with caught breath as estimable and ennobling, or issuing elegiac laments for its decline, history has been awash with warfare, butchery, disease, starvation, political murder.”^[27] More importantly, *The Orphan* exploits the dynamics of a self-reflecting stage and resorts to a source text that “is above all the work of a specific period, of a definite social condition, and of a contingent moral argument,” and thus argues that this failure to see tragic action to its end defines its own standing as a work of art but even more so the historical moment in which it is voiced.^[28]

In an experimental mode, the play registers the specificity of the moment and does serve as a document that, in LaCapra’s schema, does not “simply represent but also supplement[s] the realities to which [it] refer[s].”^[29] It is important to highlight that the play’s contribution is valuable, for as the historian explains, historical research “involves not only the processing of information but also affect, empathy, and questions of value.”^[30] Thus, in the early 1970s, *The Orphan* as an unorthodox supplement to the multisided Vietnam crisis invited the audience to reassess the immediate moment by attending closely to all those elements that affect, empathy and questions of value render possible on stage. As a result, spectators were also led to reconsider their own positions as receivers and translators. It is contended here that the emphasis on physicality and the inspiration from the seminal explorations of the performance theater style of the sixties and the seventies^[31] that inform this work do not preclude but rather reinforce Jacques Rancière’s argument that “viewing is also an action that confirms or transforms [the] distribution of positions.”^[32] Indeed, precisely because viewing is pivotal in disseminating the message, historiographical endeavors of this type can never attain their potential without an “emancipated spectator” who is willing to act upon what she receives.^[33]

The promise Greek tragedy entails for historiography and historical awareness as well as the formative impact that the latter two have on the former have been extensively explored by Ellen McLaughlin in her numerous and significant rewrites of classical works.^[34] It is no surprise that the first extant tragedy is one of them, since Aeschylus’s *The Persians* epitomizes precisely this promise. The work addresses directly a chapter in what was then recent history for the city of Athens and offers thus a critical insight into matters which were of primary urgency for its own immediate context.^[35] For her part, McLaughlin, in the introduction to her play, clearly identifies what she deems valuable in this work and stresses that while being “the only surviving Greek tragedy that treats a contemporary theme [it is also] typical of all the Greek plays that have survived for us in its unsentimental and clear-eyed view of politics and war.”^[36] Furthermore, the playwright emphasizes the fact that “the great Greek dramatists were citizens in a unique political experiment—a burgeoning democracy, newly minted, unsettled and constantly under threat, from both within and without.”^[37] Evidently, this appraisal of the genre is in tandem with interrogations that define contemporary scholarship on Greek tragedy. Thus, indicatively, Taxidou elucidates the fact “that tragedy has always been about democracy,” and goes on to explain that “this notion of democracy, however, . . . is not simply about progress, visibility and civilization but also about violence, exclusion and barbarism.”^[38]

Aspiring to create a modern play which, in its own right, invests in these precise qualities and the ensuing possibilities of the classical genre, McLaughlin undertakes to rewrite the Aeschylean prototype as “a direct response to the American invasion of Iraq in March 2003.”^[39] The act of rewriting Greek tragedy is consciously approached here as a process that renders possible a courageous engagement with recent

and contemporary history.^[40] Similar to what McLaughlin has attempted to achieve in most of her work, what underlies her efforts in this play is the conviction that there can never be an “easy relevance” between the source text and the present moment.^[41] In particular, she explains that her effort is to steer away from a “glib, formulaic response [that] does justice neither to [the American people] nor to the Greeks and belittles the complexity of what Aeschylus was responding to and [the] distinct [American] national crisis” of the early 2000s.^[42] Indeed, the play aims precisely at making audiences aware of the stark differences between the Athenian *polis* and its own contemporary context. To this end, both the value of the overall historiographical outlook of the original classic and its specific details are highlighted in the prologue McLaughlin co-wrote with Ethan McSweeney. Thus, in a Brechtian mode, the audience is presented, early on, with the information that the source text “contains the only eyewitness account we have of [the] battle [of Salamis], or indeed of any battle in the Persian Wars.”^[43]

The Persians, as a modern play, sets out to explore the multisided interaction between tragedy and history through a series of tightly organized, economical scenes that succeed each other with no formal breaks as well as by means of an equally simple, direct and unaffected dialogue construction. In this mode, the opening scene highlights the question of historical agency and brings into focus issues that relate to political power and responsibility, as the members of the chorus outline both the setting of the play and the condition that prevails in the city of Susa:

RELIGION: It is a city peopled only by anxious, silent women
Their eyes darting for omens.

CHAIRMAN: And by us, the trusted,
The ones who pointed west and told them to go,
Commanding them to leave us and seek conquest. (267)

Almost as if despite themselves, these counselors to the Persian monarchs offer a historical account which serves to disclose, first and foremost, the thrust of the imperialist expansion: “Defeat is impossible. Defeat is unthinkable. . . . When Xerxes first saw the Olympian mountains rising triumphant. . . . He thought: This too shall be Persia’s” (273). Interestingly enough, at the same moment they emerge acutely aware of the absolute stillness and sterility that now informs the Persian kingdom and as a result they are led to reflect on their own “brazen confidence” and the fact of having been “merely deafened for years by the din of [their] own empire-building” (274).

Indeed, the play invites no direct parallelism between Susa of the fifth century BC and the US at the turn of the millennium. And yet, this is a highly topical interrogation for the intended audience of a play that received its first professional production in April of 2003; a critical moment in the second decade of the US as the world’s sole power. As Howard Zinn notes, the economic and military hegemony of the US, which entered a new phase in the early 1990s, is one of multiple, far-reaching implications:

In the early nineties, the false socialism of the Soviet system had failed. And the American system seemed out of control—a runaway capitalism, a runaway technology, a runaway militarism, a running away of government from the people it claimed to represent.^[44]

It is thus no surprise that McLaughlin turns critically towards the Aeschylean tragedy and allows her own work to respond inventively to a work which, as Simon Stow insightfully notes, epitomizes the fact that “it is one thing to *tell* an audience to avoid hubris but quite another to try to cultivate an ethos that will help them to do so.”^[45] In particular, the scholar argues that through the agonistic juxtaposition of nationalism and empathy [Aeschylus’s *The Persians*] sought to cultivate in its audience an ethos appropriate to an increasingly imperialistic democracy [and thus] to motivate them to action by identifying their interests, such as avoiding the strategic and military consequences of hubris.^[46]

McLaughlin’s *The Persians* places primary emphasis on Atossa in an effort to cultivate this precise ethos in its own spectators. In an almost metadramatic tone, the figurative scheme that Justice, as a member of the chorus, employs to describe the position the queen now occupies speaks for the play’s aims; he openly likens Atossa to “a candle borne across a wasteland [that] shows a divine light” (276). As the plot develops, what proves even more illuminating is the character’s own insight into the absolute suspension and pervasive crisis in which the empire finds itself and which is inscribed on her own body: “I am haunted by my own useless importance. Every surface reflects my aging worried face back to me. I rattle around my gilded palace alone, echoing and reflecting myself” (277). Furthermore, the same lines reveal the queen’s realization that this a moment during which she is required to review her own response to history. Precisely because interest here revolves around the validity of this unconventional historiographical venture, what attracts attention is the distinctive way in which the play illuminates the character’s body as an entity that both receives and answers back to history, both intervenes in it and is ultimately claimed by it. The body of a mother and a queen as well as the motherland, a kingdom in terminal crisis, struggle here with the urgency of the moment: “What do these horrors mean? Does Persia, even now, fall from her heights, blinded and bloody? Shall my son return?” (279).

Atossa’s nightmare does anticipate and at the same time fails to capture the full extent of the catastrophe Persia encounters in history. What proves valuable for the interrogation of historical accountability more than anything else in this play are the questions Atossa articulates regarding the factors that contributed to the creation of this “blinded and bloody” empire. In an effort to emphasize this interrogation even further, McLaughlin moves beyond the source text and has also recourse to Herodotus, and thus adds a choral section on the flogging of the Hellespont (292). To the same end, the pivotal role that the Herald’s account of the Persian defeat occupies in the original prototype is reclaimed here in a self-reflecting tone: “I can’t tell it well enough to make you see it. That’s only a fraction. It’s all swimming in my head. Worse things happened” (286). Reflecting the modern play in its entirety, the Herald’s narrative is valuable since, for all its fragmentary nature, it aims at a “critical purchase” of the historical moment in question.^[47] Similar to what is argued here about Orestes’s *agon* in *The Orphan*, this is indeed a “fraction” that nonetheless allows “affect, empathy, and questions of value” to inform the spectators’ engagement with history.^[48] Motivating audience members to grow viscerally aware of their own positions as agents who act upon what they view as interpreters and translators, the play highlights effectively the question of historical agency as well as the notion of political accountability. In other words, what unites the stage and the auditorium in this case is the effort to acknowledge the material and practical dimensions which define any given subject’s position and responsibility in time and history. Similar to *The Orphan*, McLaughlin’s *The Persians* invests in tragedy not as “an antidote to suffering and pain” but as “a radical form of critique” through which the key constituencies of the democratic *polis* question, first and foremost, their own actions.^[49]

It is indeed the *agon* of an active agent in history that Atossa courageously strives to fulfill when she

appeals to her dead husband. Summoning Darius on stage, she manages to show both on-stage and off-stage audiences why it is imperative that the collective body of the people appeals to its past; in other words, why it is absolutely essential that the Persians reconnect with their own history. Through Atossa's call, the play argues that recognition of the past, historical awareness and political accountability are closely interrelated. In these terms, the Persian queen leads the way for the chorus, who at first merely rush to free themselves of any responsibility for the present catastrophe and can only blame Xerxes for what they themselves had specifically authorized at a critical moment in the past. If there is anything promising in this suffering for the Persians this becomes sensible only when they turn to history. It is only thus that they may begin on their way towards a candid review of their own responsibility for the predicament Persia now faces. It is contended here that scenes of this nature allow the play to prove in practice what is promising about the very process of dynamically rewriting Greek tragedy, nothing less than the very cultivation of ethos through "agonistic" tension that Stow accurately discerns in the Aeschylean prototype. This type of critical assessment of the empire's true worth emerges particularly pertinent to the context of the US in the early 2000s. The work outlines effectively an "agonistic" tension between blind trust in the empire's might on the one hand, and the struggle to understand the complicated repercussions of its rule on the other. Indeed, the play receives instruction from classical tragedy which "was a *questioning* not a didactic genre, one that sought to provoke theoretical reflection on the values and conflicts that the audience faced as democratic citizens."[\[50\]](#)

Atossa's struggle to understand the moment epitomizes what the two plays discussed here aspire to examine. Both works invite audiences to face the challenge of growing aware of the specificity of the present moment, what Rabe terms its "eloquence," and thus to engage actively with questions which pertain to historical agency and accountability.[\[51\]](#) Spectators are encouraged to reflect on the responsibility of those in power as well as of those in the names of whom the empire marches on. Within this frame, the two plays revisit the classical genre seeking to cultivate "both an ethic and *action*" at two disparate moments of severe crises.[\[52\]](#) This double effort is what Darius's message highlights: "Mourn the dead of this great country. . . . They shall lie in the restless waves as testament / To what horrors an overweening pridefulness can reap" (299). In the original prototype, Darius delivers his speech from the palace at Susa to address the Athenian *polis*. In McLaughlin's play, the words of the deceased Persian monarch are clearly meant to alert audiences in the US, but also across the Western world, of the actuality of present-day horrors. It is argued here that the endeavor that these two modern plays undertake proves particularly strenuous and thus even more vital since they both acquired shape in times during which historical understanding of the immediate moment was seriously undermined. In the early 1970s, *The Orphan* struggled to claim its own ground against a setting characterized by the generalized unwillingness to recognize the Vietnam War for what it really was and the ensuing hostility towards the veterans. Forty years later, *The Persians* confronted a historical instance infused by what Zinn terms "the atmosphere of wartime jingoism."[\[53\]](#) As the historian shrewdly observes, in the early 2000s, the ubiquitous display of the American flag epitomized, among other things, the reluctance and inability of the citizens to criticize the government's foreign policy and, in particular, the US intervention in the Middle East.[\[54\]](#) In both cases, key questions of the type Zinn articulates in the following lines remained, to a large extent, an impossibility for the collective American mind: "Is there 'a national interest' when a few people decide on war? . . . Should citizens not ask in whose interest are we doing what we are doing?"[\[55\]](#) The two plays studied here trace and register on stage primarily the weight of these challenging questions.

Rabe's *The Orphan* and McLaughlin's *The Persians* target areas that are simply unthinkable without the active engagement of the audience. To this purpose, they explore the dynamics of "the adaptive faculty"

and prove in practice Linda Hutcheon's point that this "is the ability to repeat without copying, to embed difference in similarity."^[56] Furthermore, they also reflect Edward Said's seminal insight on the act of rewriting as one that leads not backwards to a previous work but "rather toward 'writing in progress'."^[57] As argued above, by means of this "progress" they test their own potential as versatile tools of historiographical inquiry and showcase that "what is finally at stake is the subjectivity of the spectator, which is not necessarily passive, even if the spectator remains seated in his chair."^[58] In these words, Alain Badiou shares Jacques Rancière's view and inspects "subjective transferences, transformations [which] occur even if the spectator is immobile."^[59] It is significant to note that such transferences and transformations are particularly prominent in these two rewrites of Greek tragedy which, similar to what Toby Zinman argues about a wide array of American plays of the past two decades, manage "what media pundits and statistics cannot do: revealing the emotional truth of war."^[60] Indeed, contemporary theater work of this type incites audiences "to consider the ethical dimension of [historical] understanding [as well as the] emotional response to these insights."^[61] In these terms, the two plays discussed here prove that "viewing *is* an action" and thus highlight that political efficacy in drama and theater can only rely upon the level of action which is "owned by no one" but subsists between those on stage and those off stage.^[62]

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^[1] The fact that this effort of resituating the parent text in one's own surroundings has been a driving force for American rewrites of Greek tragedy produced well before the period on which this article focuses is precisely what Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931) best exemplifies.

^[2] Hugh Grady, "Tragedy and Materialist Thought," in *A Companion to Tragedy*, edited by Rebecca Bushnell (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005), 130.

^[3] Ibid.

^[4] Olga Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), 15.

^[5] Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*, 16.

^[6] In his highly influential book *The Production of Space*, first published in 1974, Henri Lefebvre identified this very "dissolution" of historical sensibility as one of the major pathologies of contemporary Western societies. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1991), 416. In 1983, Fredric Jameson outlined "historical amnesia" as one of the most distinguishing features of postmodernity. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer

Society,” in *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories, Practices*, edited by E. Ann Kaplan (London: Verso, 1988), 28. David Harvey, in 1990, commented specifically on postmodernism’s “incredible ability to plunder history.” David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1990), 54.

[7] Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 15.

[8] Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*, 5.

[9] Stathis Gourgouris accurately notes that tragedy is “endemic” to democracy. Specifically, the scholar stresses that “tragic theater *is* political, not because of its content, but because, by all accounts, it is endemic to this peculiar mode of self-organization that emerged in Athens.” Stathis Gourgouris, “Democracy is a Tragic Regime,” *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (2014): 811 (emphasis in original).

[10] Sanja Bahun-Radunovi?, “History in Postmodern Theater: Heiner Müller, Caryl Churchill, and Suzan-Lori Parks,” *Comparative Literature Studies* 45, no. 4 (2008): 466.

[11] LaCapra, *Writing History*, 36.

[12] The other three plays David Rabe wrote in response to the Vietnam War are *Sticks and Bones* (1969), *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1971), and *Streamers* (1976).

[13] David Savran, *In Their Own Words: Contemporary American Playwrights* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1988), 193 (emphasis in original).

[14] David Rabe, “Afterword: 1992,” in *The Vietnam Plays. Volume Two: Streamers, The Orphan* (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 193.

[15] Michael Walton, *The Greek Sense of Theatre: Tragedy and Comedy Reviewed* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 74.

[16] Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 24–25.

[17] In his detailed stage history of Rabe’s work, Philip Kolin documents insightfully how formative the experience of watching Jean-Claude Van Itallie’s *The Serpent* at the Open Theater in 1969 proved for the playwright. Philip C. Kolin, *David Rabe: A Stage History* (New York: Garland, 1988), 52.

[18] David Rabe, *The Orphan*, in *The Vietnam Plays. Volume Two*, 89. Further references to this play will be noted parenthetically in the text.

[19] Kolin provides information on the experience of a 1967 Off-Broadway production of Euripides’s tragedy that inspired the playwright to write a one-act play by the title *The Bones of Birds*, which was performed for the first time in 1968 at Villanova University while Rabe was still a graduate student there, and which he later re-worked and expanded into what resulted in *The Orphan*. Kolin, *David Rabe*, 51.

[20] Gourgouris, “Democracy is a Tragic Regime,” 811.

[21] Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*, 7.

[22] Grady, “Tragedy and Materialist Thought,” 141.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*, 5.

[26] Rabe, “Afterword: 1992,” 197.

[27] Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 205.

[28] Roland Barthes, “Putting on the Greeks,” in *Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 65.

[29] Dominick LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 62.

[30] LaCapra, *Writing History*, 35.

[31] See Kolin, *David Rabe*, 52.

[32] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2009), 13.

[33] Ibid.

[34] McLaughlin’s first rewrite of Greek tragedy, *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* (1994), offers a distinctive and invaluable feminine perspective into history, in general, and the role that history written by men assigns to women across the ages, in particular. The play was by no means an exception and was followed by works that also address issues of historical understanding, such as *The Trojan Women* (1995) and *Oedipus* (2005).

[35] *The Persians* was first presented, as part of an otherwise missing trilogy, during the City Dionysia of 472 BC. In his insightful reading of Aeschylus’s work, Simon Stow quotes Harry C. Avery’s following lines on the characteristics of that historical moment, “Themistocles was probably still in Athens. Xerxes was still on the Persian throne. . . . The victories of 480 and 479 had been magnificent, but it had taken the Persians ten years to return to Greece after Marathon. What guarantee was there that the Persians would not come back again?” Simon Stow, *American Mourning: Tragedy, Democracy, Resilience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 127. In the process, the scholar articulates his own point that, “in such circumstances, the dangers of overconfidence emanating from the Greek victory at Salamis were all the more pressing.” Stow, *American Mourning*, 127.

[36] Ellen McLaughlin, “Introduction,” *The Greek Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group,

2005), 253.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*, 7–8.

[39] McLaughlin, “Introduction,” 254.

[40] Ellen McLaughlin is in no way isolated regarding her approach to Greek tragedy. It is instructive to note that a large number of significant contemporary theater practitioners have adapted the same view of the classical genre over the past few decades. It is precisely in this vein that Tony Randall, founder and artistic director of New York City’s National Actors Theatre, invited McLaughlin to pen this rewrite of Aeschylus’s work. Randall stressed that the Iraq invasion could not go unnoticed by theater people and that there was a pressing need for artists to examine what he himself termed “a terrible time in [contemporary American] history.” McLaughlin, “Introduction,” 255. Interestingly enough, several other important efforts in contemporary drama and theater had already targeted the exact same area. It suffices to note as an example Peter Sellars’s controversial production of *The Persians* in 1993, which was conceived as a reaction to the first Gulf War.

[41] McLaughlin, “Introduction,” 254.

[42] Ibid., 255.

[43] Ellen McLaughlin, *The Persians*, in *The Greek Plays*, 266. Further references to this play will be noted parenthetically in the text.

[44] Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2005), 638.

[45] Stow, *American Mourning*, 123 (emphasis in original).

[46] Ibid., 126–27.

[47] LaCapra, *Writing History*, 36.

[48] LaCapra, *Writing History*, 35.

[49] Taxidou, *Tragedy, Modernity and Mourning*, 2.

[50] Stow, *American Mourning*, 120 (emphasis added).

[51] Rabe, “Afterword: 1992,” 197.

[52] Stow, *American Mourning*, 123 (emphasis added).

[53] Zinn, *A People’s History*, 680.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Ibid., 685.

[56] Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 174.

[57] Edward Said, "On Originality," in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 136.

[58] Alain Badiou, with Nicolas Touring, *In Praise of Theatre*, trans. Andrew Bielski (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2015), 33.

[59] Badiou, with Nicolas Touring, *In Praise of Theatre*, 35.

[60] Toby Zinman, "American Theatre since 1990," in *Visions of Tragedy in Modern American Drama*, edited by David Palmer (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2018), 227.

[61] Freddie Rokem, "Discursive Practices and Narrative Models: History, Poetry, Philosophy," in *History, Memory, Performance*, edited by David Dean, Yana Meerzon, and Kathryn Prince (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 27.

[62] Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, 13 (emphasis added), 15.

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Table of Contents:

- "Introduction: Reflections on the Tragic in Contemporary American Drama and Theatre" by Johanna Hartmann and Julia Rössler
- "Rewriting Greek Tragedy / Confronting History in Contemporary American Drama: David Rabe's *The Orphan* (1973) and Ellen McLaughlin's *The Persians* (2003)" by Konstantinos Blatanis
- "Haunting Echoes: Tragedy in Quiara Alegría Hudes's *Elliot Trilogy*" by Nathalie Aghoro
- "'Take Caroline Away': Catastrophe, Change, and the Tragic Agency of Nonperformance in Tony Kushner's *Caroline, or Change*" by Joanna Mansbridge
- "The Poetics of the Tragic in Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*" by Julia Rössler
- "Branding Bechdel's *Fun Home*: Activism and the Advertising of a 'Lesbian Suicide Musical'" by Maureen McDonnell

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