War, Revolution and Drama : Staging Greek Tragedy in Contemporary Portugal

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Violence tragique et guerres antiques au miroir du théâtre et du cinéma (XVII^e^-XXI^e^ siècles)

sous la direction de
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Résumé : Cet article propose un aperçu de la manière dont les tragédies grecques sont mises en scène au Portugal au début du 21ème siècle. En partant de deux représentations particulières: *l'Orestie* (2012) et *Ion* (2014), il s'agira d'interroger la manière dont les significations politiques d'origine sont transformées pour faire sens face à un public contemporain, et de mettre en lumière certains des enjeux de ces représentations.

Mots-clés : tragédie grecque, Portugal, 21ème siècle, mise en scène, *Orestie*, *Ion*

Abstract: *This paper offers an overview of how ancient Greek tragedies are being performed in Portugal in the beginning of the 21st century. Taking two particular performances in consideration: Oresteia (2012) and Ion (2014), it will look into how the original political meanings are transformed to make sense to a contemporary audience as well as to highlight some of the challenges presented in these performances.*

Keywords: *greek Tragedy, Portugal, 21st century , performance,* Oresteia, Ion

How does one stage an ancient tragedy to a contemporary audience? The choices are almost endless, and each one of them brings a series of challenges: from meaning to aesthetics or even performative aspects. What if this performance were to have a strong political meaning? Does one build on the play itself, on its original political setting or does one bring the play to a new context?

The relationship between politics and Greek tragedy is not a new one. In fact it was fundamental already in the original performances of Greek plays. The adaptation of Greek plays to contexts contemporary to the audiences has a large history throughout most western countries and has been the subject of a series of studies[1]. In the Portuguese context, however, there is need for some relevant studies on how politics and the performance of ancient tragedy have interacted during the last decades[2]. Nonetheless, in the last couple of years (2012-14) there have been at least two major performances of classical texts with an important political overtone: *The Oresteia*, by Teatro de Braga in 2012-13, and the *Ion*, by Teatro da Cornucópia in 2014. This paper will focus on these two plays, both having the particularity of trying to bring the ancient plays into the political context of the performance while retaining a huge connection with tradition. Given the lack of broader studies on the questions of performance of classical texts in Portugal, this is no more than a small attempt to give a general picture of the mainstream approach to stage Greek tragedies in the last few years, taking into account some of the specific challenges in question.

Adding to the questions of when, how and why to stage a Greek play, one has to ask the question of which text to stage. Here, too, the options are multiple: a translation as close as possible to the original text, a translation closer to the audience, a prose

[1] The Politics in Greek Tragedy have been the subject of too many titles to list here. For a theoretical approach see: Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece*, vol. 7, New York, Harvester Press, 1981; Suzanne Saïd, "Tragedy and politics", in Deborah Boedeker and Kurt A. Raaflaub (eds.), *Democracy, Empire, and the Arts in Fifth-century Athens*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998, p. 275-295; J. Peter Euben, *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*, California, University of California Press, 1986; for an introduction with bibliography see David M. Carter, *The Politics of Greek Tragedy*, Exeter, Exeter University Press, 2007; for connections with the city state see Richard Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-state*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1995; Christopher Pelling, *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997; Simon Goldhill and Robin Osborne (eds.), *Performance Culture and Athenian Democracy*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999.
On the politics of modern performances, see for example Sylvie Humbert-Mougin, *Dionysos revisité : les tragiques grecs en France de Leconte de Lisle à Claudel*, Paris, Belin, 2003; Edith Hall, Oliver Taplin and Fiona Macintosh, *Medea in Performance, 1500-2000*, Oxford, Legenda, 2000; Edith Hall, Fiona Macintosh and Amanda Wrigley, *Dionysus since 69: Greek Tragedy at the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004; Claire Lechevalier, *L'invention d'une origine. Traduire Eschyle en France, de Lefranc de Pompignan à Mazon : le* Prométhée enchaîné, vol. 65, Paris, Honoré Champion.

[2] There is a fair number of studies on this matter on individual plays, namely Carlos Morais' studies on Portuguese adaptations of *Antigona* (see, for example, Carlos Morais, "A *Antígona* de António Sérgio: 'um estudo social em forma dialogada'", in Carlos Morais (coord.), *Máscaras Portuguesas de Antígona*, Aveiro, Universidade de Aveiro, 2001, p. 13-38; Carlos Morais, "A *Antígona* de António Pedro: liberdades de uma glosa", in Aurora López and Andrés Pociña (eds.), *Comedias, Tragedias y Leyendas Grecorromanas en el Teatro de siglo XX*, Granada, Universidade de Granada, 2009, p. 427-439) but there is a lack of larger spectrum studies.

translation, a poetic translation, an adaptation, a new text that modernises the meaning of the play, to name a few. The question of the translation is a complicated one and has long divided the traditional classicists, known as philologists (which by itself gives a hint as to on which side of this spectrum they tend to be), and the artists connected to the performance itself or even known writers[3]. These questions live along with the more theoretical topics on whether the translation should domesticate the text or make it foreign for the audience[4]. Classicists tend to tame and domesticate the original text, while other authors might go in different directions; however, as Taplin points out, this does not need to define the relationship between philologists and the translation of Greek tragedies:

> This brings me to the point when I can challenge the notion, which is quite widespread among those interested in translation from Greek and Latin, that knowledge of the original language is somehow bound to lead to respectable domestication. Hand-in-hand with this is the supposition that tame translation is the province of scholars, while literary daring and inventiveness is the province of artists or amateurs who are not hampered by a knowledge of the original.[5]

If this is the situation case with the English translations, the Portuguese case is even more specific and difficult: there is a huge and problematic lack of translations. As Luis Miguel Cintra, a well-renowned director and actor in Portugal, has stated recently:

> These days people stage the plays they can - the ones they can and they know of. There are almost no plays published in Portuguese translated from other languages. People don't know French anymore, so the French plays are disregarded. The English they know, learned in school, is not enough for Shakespeare, for example. It is very hard. There is a huge restriction in choosing the texts.[6]

And this is not a problem specific only to the classical texts, where there is a noticeable lack of suitable translations. Even if the situation has improved in recent years, some ancient plays still do not have a modern translation in European Portuguese, and only a few have more than one translation available. For the two cases I want to study here, there is but one translation of the text, both around 20 years old and both made by

[3] Taplin, *op. cit.*, p. 239: "Classicists like their translations to be describable as, for example, close, accurate, plain, consistent. These epithets would fit all four of the current major series of translations: Loeb, Penguin, Worlds Classics, and Everyman. Many of the surviving tragedies have, in fact, been retranslated for these series recently; and it is very telling that all four translate into prose. All have been too cautious to risk or to defy the accusations and denigrations that literary or poetic versions almost invariably attract from classicists: distortion, taking liberties, self-indulgence, and so forth. Poetic effusions may be tolerated, or even admired, if they are the creations of fringe-figure geniuses, like Ezra Pound, or poets who know no Greek, such as Christopher Logue; but those who know the languages well are expected to play safe."

[4] On the discussion of these topics, see Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, New York, Routledge, 2008; for a discussion on how these concepts apply to Greek tragedy, see Oliver Taplin, "The Harrison Version:' So long ago that it's become a song?", in Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin (eds.), Agamemnon *in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, 2005, p. 239-245.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 245.

[6] Luís Miguel Cintra, *Luís Miguel Cintra: cinco conversas em Almada*, Almada, Teatro de Almada, 2015, p.74-75.

philologists, thinking first and foremost for an academic public, which was necessary given the lack of any other translation but which nevertheless poses some challenges upon staging.

With this in mind, I would like to focus on the performance decisions made for *Oresteia*, presented by the director Rui Madeira from Teatro de Braga. First performed in Braga and developed as part of the commemorations of Braga 2012 - European Youth Capital, it was then staged in other cities around the country. The translation of the *Oresteia* is a prose translation[7], very close to the Greek text. The decision of the director was to follow the text line by line on all the three plays.

The presentation of the plays follow very strong political lines. There is a text handed out to the audience before the play begins; the title of the text is *Oresteia the Tragedy of Europe. In Search of a Political Theatre*. This text starts with the affirmation: "with the *Oresteia* we want to focus on contemporaneity, on us". From this introduction it is clear what is expected of this performance: to engage the public, to use the original myth to make the audience think about their present. The edginess, at least for the Portuguese context, of the tone of the introductory text created a mood of protest, indignation and non-conformity with the reality. This is a performance that wants the audience to think about protest.

The first two plays pretty much follow the text without much adaptation. There is an introduction of a multimedia display during Agamemnon. The choice of wardrobe follows contemporary lines, except for the chorus in *Agamemnon*, which is wrapped in the banners that were spread before the beginning of the play, in "stylised peplos". The political references were not very strong in the first two plays, and I would like to focus mainly in the last play of the trilogy.

There were breaks between the plays, and after the break between *Choephorae* and *Eumenides* the public was conducted back to the stage: for *Eumenides*, the audience sits on chairs arranged on the stage. The chairs are in five or six rows and there are some televisions in front of the audience playing huge eyes intended to make the audience feel watched. So, in this last play there is an inversion; the audience is now on stage; they are not spectators anymore; in fact, there is someone looking at them, with big strange eyes. The stage is closed so the audience does not see the theatre seats, which they would assume to be empty. Orestes comes onto stage with the awful Erinyes following him and the play begins. When the place of action changes from Delphi to Athens, things start to get quite political. In fact, even if we look at the original play, it is here that things start to get political.

The original myth of Orestes has nothing to do with Athens or Athena: originally Orestes' guilt problem was solved in Delphi. As far as I know, there have not been many stagings of this play where the Eumenides have kept their original political strength. The change in setting had a very strong political impact on the first staging of this play[8]. The

[7] Manuel de Oliveira Pulquério, *Ésquilo, Oresteia:* Agamémnon, Coéforas, Euménides, Coimbra, Edições 70, 1992.

[8] See, for example, Christian Meier, *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993; Kenneth J. Dover, "The Political Aspect of Aeschylus's *Eumenides*", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, vol. 77, issue 2, 1957, p. 230-237; Lindsay G. H. Hall, "Ephialtes, the Areopagus and the Thirty", *The Classical Quarterly* (New Series), vol. 40, n° 2, 1990, p. 319-328; J. L. Marr, "Ephialtes the Moderate?",

problems created by the trilogy will be solved not in Argos, where they belonged in the first place, nor in Delphi, where Orestes goes in search for purification, but in the Areopagus, which had been reformed a couple of years before the play was staged for the first time. This change in myth underlines not only the role Athens wanted to play in terms of purification and the guardianship of civilisation, but also the importance and relevance of the Athenian juridical system. We know for a fact that, around this time, Athens was trying to export their juridical system, and we know that the Athenian courts were open to rule on external matters even if they had nothing whatsoever to do with Athens.[9]

Going back to this performance, when the play goes to Athens, the curtains of the stage are opened and the audience can finally see the seating area. Here they find the banners that greeted them at the beginning, as well as some of the actors watching the play. Athena comes in and her cape is nothing other than the blue flag of Europe with its twelve stars. The great decision maker, the ruler of this new court, is Europe herself. Here is where the play gains its most interesting political references, though the director's choices do not make it clear if he fully understood them. In the original play the decision whether Orestes is guilty or not is taken by a jury of Athenian citizens. The finale of the play can, however, be read in two ways: the first is quite clear in saying that any problem can be solved in Athens, even problems which, outside of Athens, seem unsolvable, such as the endless cycle of blood and revenge. Justice in Athens, then, can overcome any problem; indeed, the play is normally read as putting on stage the old gods and the new gods, and showing the new gods winning and creating a modern and prosperous city. Even though Athena leads the court, the citizens have the right to make the decision. And this brings us back to the theme of the play: the tragedy of Europe.

The play means to send a clear message that Europe is in trouble if she does not listen to her citizens, and, with the audience as citizens in the centre of the stage, that we are the decision-makers, we have to make ourselves heard. And from the introductory text we see there is a clear opposition between Northern and South Europe: we in the south — that is, Portugal, the Greeks and possibly Italy or Spain — should just do something about European politics. As the play ends, the actors sitting in the audience area get up and applaud the audience in a moment where everything in the theatre is reversed, where the actors are the audience and the audience are the actors, and the performance concludes with both actors and audience singing the "Grândola, Vila Morena", a song that is the anthem of the Portuguese revolution. The political intent of the performance is perfectly clear. However, the strongest political elements of the play are all built around the text and not within it: the banners, the idea of bringing the audience onto the stage, the European flag as part of the wardrobe, the final song — nothing changes the action; there are no new characters; there is no change in the plot; and there is not a line changed from the translation.

Greece and Rome (Second Series), vol. 40, n° 1, 1993, p. 11-19; Alan H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylus:* Eumenides, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

[9] Around the same time, we also see references to the courts in decrees pertaining to Athens' allies in the *archê*. The Phaselis (IG I^3 10), Miletos (IG i^2 22) and Chalcis (IG i^2 39) decrees assign certain cases for the allies to Athenian jurisdiction. Athens was exporting her judicial system just as they exported their democracy. For a full discussion of the Athenian Imperial Jurisdiction, see Russell Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire*, New York, Clarendon Press, 1972, p. 220-233.

The second play was performed in a very peculiar context: upon the 40th anniversary of the Portuguese revolution, in 2014. During the night of 25 April 1974, a dictatorship of more than 40 years was (finally) overthrown by military forces; forty years later and the ideology and vocabulary of the revolution are still very relevant in Portugal and very much used in Portuguese political discourse, even if sometimes without much substance. Forty years is of course an important anniversary. Yet this anniversary occurs during a particularly difficult moment in the history of Portugal. The economic crisis and subsequent political, social and cultural crises seemed to cast a dark shadow in this commemorations.

The programme included a long list of events, one of which was a play at the municipal theatre of Lisbon: Teatro S. Luiz. This play was commissioned by the Teatro da Cornucópia and directed by Luis Miguel Cintra. It is worth noting that, in terms of professional theatre, and disregarding amateur and university theatre, Cornucopia is the Portuguese theatre with the greatest number of performances of classical texts in the last 40 years. So, this company shows a particular interest in reworking classical texts. The commission did not include any specifications on which play or even the theme of the play, as long as it could be part of the commemorations.

According to the director of the theatre, Luis Miguel Cintra, this situation was not only uncommon but somewhat problematic:

> It was not our decision [to make this play]. I did not want to make a performance about the 25th of April. It's way too serious and important for us to enjoy doing it outside of our theatre, the house we have been defending for the last 40 years. And there isn't a dramatic text on the subject in which I could recognise myself. I did not want a party, I did not want a celebration; I wanted, if I could, to maybe give people something to think about.[10]

There is clearly a climate of discomfort about this play. This climate is not indifferent to the crisis, to the problems that Portuguese democracy is struggling with nor to the extensive budget cuts into culture, namely theatres.

The Cornucópia decided to go with a performance of an ancient Greek play by Euripides — *Ion*. Euripides had never been played before by the company, though they have Aristophanes and Sophocles in their list of performances. The reason seemed quite good: *Ion* is a play about democracy, or even better, the problems of democracy. As the director states "do we accept the democratic life with all its difficulties and shortcomings lying about the bad ways in which it works, or should we reject it and search for another path? The dilemma is very interesting and is very contemporary"[11]. To choose one of the most Athenian plays to talk about democracy seemed very interesting. How do you turn a political play that talked to a 5th-century-BC democratic Athenian audience into a political play that talks to a 21st century Portuguese democratic audience? The approach seemed critical, innovative and quite fresh.

The director's intentions were clear: this was not a celebration; this was a reflection on democracy, on contemporary democracy. The idea was to create, and I quote, "not a direct correspondence with the inspiring text but a parallel hypothesis between mythology

[10] Luis Miguel Cintra in *O Público* (24/04/2014).
[11] From presentation of the play available at http://www.teatro-cornucopia.pt

and contemporaneity in a time of reflection on the effects of April"[12]. I would like to underline the idea that what we have here, in the words of the director, is an original text being used as inspiration and then a parallel narrative being created between the text and the audience's reality.

I quote again, "In this case, we wanted to do something different: we did not want something that would talk about the 25th of April but about what we have lived in these 40 years since then. And what we have lived is a deception of the hope my generation had in the ways of making politics"[13].

Even the poster was quite refreshing: it showed a Greek chorus dressed in a business suit; this was Greece in new, modern robes; this was Euripides for the contemporary audience. Yet the main themes of the revolution were present: the idea of democracy, liberty, how these values are perpetuated, how they are passed on to the new generation — this is what Ion is about. The space was very meaningful: the theatre was mere metres from the ancient political police headquarters. One of the only places where the revolution claimed the lives of four young men.

Once again the director decided to stage the play based on the only translation available in European Portuguese[14]. There are a few relevant aspects to the performance. The stage curtain is substituted by an enormous flag of the Portuguese republic. The play begins and ends with different songs by, again, Zeca Afonso, one of the biggest icons of the revolution and the author of "Grândola, Vila Morena".

As the play is staged, between the stage and the audience is a desk, upon which are books and a small statue of the Portuguese republic, and at which sits the director throughout the play. This desk is one of the spaces where the tragedy and the present connect; it is outside of the stage and the director does not perform any part of the play, yet he will at some moments, when the play pauses, come forward and recite quotes from certain texts: quotes from Pasolini's letter to Gennariello — a text that, according to the director, has the objective of "bringing Gennariello out of modernity into a project of preserving an imaginary autenticity of the People, these are letters against the corruption of time."[15] — and a poem by Sophia de Mello Breyner.

The decision of the director was to cut the chorus but maintain the text and to have it read out loud, from the Portuguese edition, by an actor. Other than that, all of the director's choices are very traditional. The play is set in Delphi, and the scenery includes a tripod to represent the sanctuary. The wardrobe is very traditional, with the actors dressed in what represents ancient clothing, with the exception of Ion who, at some point, wears the military uniform of the dictatorship and the revolution. The play is represented in a very hieratic form, with minimal movement and gestures by the actors.

It is amazing to see how all the new elements are built, once more, around the play: outside the stage or before or after the text. What is around the play makes us think of modernity (but is that not already a necessity when you attend a play in a modern building, when people ask you to turn off your mobiles etc?). The only two elements that are somewhat innovative in the play are the figurine of Ion and the chorus. The chorus is always a problem in contemporary performance, but the choice here is to keep the text

[12] Luis Miguel Cintra in *O Público* (24/04/2014).
[13] From presentation of the play available at http://www.teatro-cornucopia.pt
[14] Frederico Lourenço, *Eurípides*. Íon, Lisboa, Colibri, 1994.
[15] From presentation of the play available at http://www.teatro-cornucopia.pt

and turn it into a poem of sorts, read aloud, not enacted, not part of the play. I will not dwell here on the discussion about the importance of Euripides' choruses for the action of his plays[16]. The chorus is fundamental in order to resituate this play, originally set in Delphi, in Athens; this is a fundamental Athenian element. Yet choosing to keep the text and read it as it is to a modern audience is to break any kind of relationship with the audience, to make the play even more foreign and alien than ancient plays are already to a contemporary Portuguese audience.

It is interesting to note that the play was very well received. It is also important to note that these performances, being quite different from each other, represent a certain attitude towards the performance of classical texts in the last few years in Portugal. With the exception of some smaller, local and sometimes even amateur performances, decisions relating to the performance of Greek tragedy in established theatres is very conservative. In some way, both of these plays represent some edging, as they try to bring the ancient text into a new context and make it say new things to a new audience. Yet, as we have seen from these examples, all the new meaning is conveyed through elements built around the play, and, more importantly, through new meanings built around the text. Somehow the text, in its traditional, philological translations, is seen as immutable, sacred, something to be followed line by line. And from this often, even if not always, follow staging choices that tend to be very conservative, from the stage props to wardrobes to the line of performance itself. The movements are curbed; the voices are projected and recitative; the time is almost always a clear distant past, a past that, to have meaning to a contemporary audience, needs a full set of small additions strategically placed around the permanent and immutable text. Some, if not most, of these choices may come from a lack of options in terms of translation. As we have seen, there is no variety of texts available. When there is but one version of a text, it is hard to change this, to see the translation as a choice other than an inevitability. When there is but one choice, it is hard to see it as a choice at all: the lack of variety makes it very hard to understand that a translation is not set in stone, that no translation is ever the perfect version of the original text, that the translation itself is made of a series of choices to tame the text, to bring it closer to our reality or to make it more foreign, choices on whether to prioritise meaning or sound, semantics or rhythm, images or words, emotions or logic etc. When the reality of translation is such, it makes it hard for the public to realise that the choices of the translator, great as they might be for a specific objective, are not the only ones available. Maybe the rigidity we often see in many performances of classical drama in Portugal, a rigidity that most of the public expects and enjoys, springs from a strong rigidity in translation. Maybe the problem is not that the philologists keep being philologists, but that not many outsiders have come to challenge them in their set ways.

[16] Besides the two monumental volumes by Martin Hose, *Studien zum Chor bei Eurípides*, Zwei Bde, Stuttgart, Teubner, 1990, see Carlo Prato, "Il coro di Euripide: funzione e struttura", *Dioniso*, nº 55, 1985, p. 147-155; Donald J. Mastronarde, "Knowledge and Authority in the Choral Voice of Euripidean Tragedy", *Syllecta Classica*, vol. 10(1), 1999, p. 87-104; Sofia Frade, "Lirismo a metro ou nova estética euripidiana? As Odes Corais de Fenícias", in Maria Cristina Pimentel and Paulo F. Alberto, *Vir bonus peritissimus aeque: Estudos de homenagem a Arnaldo do Espírito Santo*, Lisboa, Centro de Estudos Clássicos, 2013, p. 111-122.

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