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Radical Revisions of Greek Tragedy: Charles Mee's Anti-war Polemics

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ABSTRACT

Along the thread of the enduring tradition of rewriting Greek tragedies and re-contextualising them for the American audiences of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Charles Mee has had a most prolific contribution. Among the numerous rewrites that constitute Mee's own versions of the plays' classical counterparts, the five plays which are analysed in my dissertation present a clear thematic convergence, all of them being preoccupied with US imperial wars and military invasions of the twentieth century. Largely inspired by the tragic and mythic strands related to the Trojan War, *Orestes 2.0* (1992), *Agamemnon 2.0* (1994), *Trojan Women: A Love Story* (1994), *Iphigenia 2.0* (2007), and *Thyestes 2.0* (2015) pose questions around the detrimental effects of imperial politics, and raise a multileveled critique on contemporary American public life. My dissertation aims at exploring how Greek tragedy, distilled through Mee's pen, serves as a cultural stimulus which invites spectators to reassess contemporary American history. More specifically, my dissertation analyses how the similarities and departures from the parent-texts shape Mee's narrative, and discusses the role of the modern components and intertextual references introduced in the plays (war veteran testimonies, items of popular culture, pieces of video art etc.). Analysing the patchwork of ancient and modern fragments woven together, the present dissertation explores how these elements assist the playwright in formulating his anti-war polemics, and how the critique raised by Mee's plays is relevant to contemporary American reality.

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INTRODUCTION

Along the thread of the enduring tradition of rewriting Greek tragedies and re-contextualising them for the American audiences of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Charles Mee has had a most prolific contribution. Born in 1938 and professionally active up to the present day as a Special Lecturer at Columbia University, Mee has had a long and particularly productive career both as a historian and as a playwright. A large part of his work as a playwright involves his radical revisions of canonical plays, and his interest in ancient Greek drama has resulted in a whole series of plays which constitute Mee's own versions of their ancient Greek counterparts. Stressing the notion of the *version*, many of Mee's rewrites are followed by digits: borrowing from the convention of semantic versioning in software technology, according to which each modified or updated version of a software programme can be identified by its numerical credentials, Mee implicitly urges his readers, audiences and fellow artists to consider his works as versions which are neither the first nor the last ones. Among the numerous rewrites that constitute Mee's own versions of the plays' classical counterparts, the five plays which are analysed in my dissertation present a clear thematic convergence, all of them being preoccupied with US imperial wars and military invasions of the twentieth century. Largely inspired by the tragic and mythic strands related to the Trojan War, *Orestes 2.0* (1992), *Agamemnon 2.0* (1994), *Trojan Women: A Love Story* (1994), *Iphigenia 2.0* (2007), and *Thyestes 2.0* (2015) pose questions around the detrimental effects of imperial politics, and raise a multileveled critique on contemporary American public life. My dissertation aims at exploring how Greek tragedy, distilled through Mee's pen, serves as a cultural stimulus which invites spectators to reassess contemporary American history.

The first chapter examines how Mee has seen in Greek tragedies a fruitful medium in order to express his anti-war preoccupations. In this scope, the chapter briefly looks into a number of significant instances in the history of anti-war drama, and draws on theoretical approaches of the practice of adaptation, in order to illuminate certain angles of Mee's versions of tragedies. The five plays are analysed in regards to each one's specific contribution to formulating Mee's anti-war polemics, while the similarities and departures from the prototype works are discussed in order to designate how Mee's radical revisions recontextualise classical tragedy in a modern

perspective. The second chapter focuses on the different strands of public critique Mee's plays aspire to raise beyond the anti-war critique itself. More specifically, this chapter explores how Mee's plays rework specific themes and elements of the tragedies in order to invite their audiences to reflect upon several facets of contemporary American politics. Finally, the third chapter explores the role of the variety of elements that Mee interweaves with tragedy, and examines how contemporary non-fictional texts but also other forms of art are embedded in Mee's rewrites to assist the playwright in expressing his anti-war and sociopolitical preoccupations.

1. TRAGEDY AS A SCAFFOLDING FOR CHARLES MEE'S ANTI-WAR PREOCCUPATIONS

1.1 Introduction

The present chapter will examine how Charles Mee has seen in Greek tragedies a fruitful medium in order to express his anti-war preoccupations. In this scope, the chapter begins with a brief account of some significant instances in the history of anti-war drama—a detailed account of this history would be beyond the scope of the present dissertation—as a framework for relevant modern ventures. In a similar vein, Chapter 1 will draw on theoretical approaches of the practice of adaptation, in order to illuminate certain angles of rewriting Greek tragedy, especially focusing on Mee's versions of tragedies. The five plays will be analysed in regards to each one's specific focus and their contribution to formulating Mee's anti-war poetics. Insight on the plotlines of the five plays will be provided not only to facilitate the reader's understanding of the arguments throughout my whole dissertation, but most importantly to shed light on the similarities and departures from the prototype works, which is essential, I believe, to understand Mee's rewriting venture. What I aim at exploring is how Greek tragedy, distilled through Mee's pen, can serve as a cultural stimulus which invites spectators to reflect upon contemporary American reality. On the one hand, I will delve into how *Iphigenia 2.0*, *Trojan Women: A Love Story*, and *Thyestes 2.0* recontextualise classical tragedy in a modern perspective in order to invite the intended audience's critical reflection upon the suffering inflicted by contemporary imperial politics. On the other hand, I will examine how Mee's *Agamemnon 2.0* and *Orestes 2.0* creatively approach the themes of history and disability to enrich Mee's anti-war critique, and to stress why this critique is both needed and relevant to contemporary American reality.

1.2 The Thread of Anti-war Theatre and Mee's Contribution through Rewriting Greek Tragedy

Trying to examine how far back the roots of anti-war theatre can be traced, one should look into ancient Greek drama. Plays like Aeschylus's *The Persians* or Euripides's *The Trojan Women* are overtly preoccupied with the issue of war and its devastating effects, not in a vacuum but dialectically responding to the sociopolitical framework in which these works were created. Moreover, tragedy was not the only genre which lent itself for such preoccupations: Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* is only a specimen of how comedy and satire also intervened in the public discourse of their time. However, war does not stop preoccupying playwrights once Greek drama ceases to be written. During the Renaissance, "War and Peace was one of those polarities that … writers persistently thought about as well as with" (S. Marx 49), and William Shakespeare, after his shift from a partisan of war to a partisan of peace,[1] authors a number of relevant plays. In *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, Shakespeare undermines the symbols and values of the Renaissance military culture and condemns war by shrinking the proportions of epic to the distortions of satire (S. Marx 59, 71). In contemporary theatre, the sporadic anti-war plays which can be traced in the years of the two World Wars are followed by a wave of anti-war plays culminating, especially in the United States, in the years of the Vietnam War. Interestingly, this culmination coincides with the turning point at which theatre practitioners' effort to approach Greek tragedy on the US stage becomes more systematic than ever before, with an abundance of American retellings and rewritings of Greek tragedy largely oriented around the war theme, inaugurating a long-term interest that persists until the twenty-first century.

Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* provides an invaluable theoretical framework for the approach and understanding of such artistic ventures. The scholar proposes that an adaptation should be perceived both as a product and as a process. On the one hand, she suggests that, as a product, an adaptation is an "announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works," and a "transcoding" that involves "a change of frame and therefore context" (7–8). As a process on the other hand, an adaptation is an act of "(re)-creation" and "(re-)interpretation," which is experienced as a palimpsest through the memory of other works that "resonate through repetition with variation" (8). As for the motives behind adaptations, Hutcheon argues that adaptations are often undertaken in order to engage in a social

critique, and it seems that this "political and historical intentionality" (94) is what playwrights have sought for throughout the past decades.

Indeed, when asked by his daughter Erin, director and performance historian, why so many directors and playwrights resorted to Greek tragedy as a source of creative inspiration in the 1970s, Charles Mee straightforwardly highlights the significant role of the Vietnam War. He explains that a number of his "Greek" plays, such as the *Imperial Dreams Trilogy* (that is *Iphigenia 2.0*, *Trojan Women*, and *Orestes 2.0*) and *Agamemnon 2.0* derive directly from his "involvement with anti-Vietnam War activities" and the beginning of his "obsessive-compulsive preoccupation with the end of the American Empire" (E. Mee, *CMRMGD* 732). However, Mee does not limit this explanation to his own personal experiences and endeavours. While reflecting on the significance of the chorus in Greek tragedies, and by extension on the social role of the theatre at the time, the playwright further explicates and condenses the potential reasons why theatre practitioners of the 1970s looked back at the works of the tragedians:

> In the 1970s people went back to the Greeks to go back to the roots of how to write a good play that included the voice of the people. These two powerful forces come together, then, in the 1970s: a radical questioning of America's political and economic role as an empire, and people in the theater looking for a different way of making theater that would reflect how they live in the world. Both of those take you to the Greeks. (E. Mee, *CMRMGD* 732)

Mee's words shed light both on why the 1970s amplified the trend of theatre practitioners "returning" to Greek tragedy and how the latter invited rewrites revolving around anti-war themes linked to the US imperial enterprises of the time. Charles Mee himself, following a whole thread woven by both predecessors and contemporaries of his (like Richard Shechner, David Rabe and Ellen McLaughlin), has been one of the most prolific playwrights who undertook the venture to re-historicise Greek tragedies. Raymond Williams's observation that tragedy is not only a body of literature or an academic problem but also an immediate experience (33) is worth considering when one attempts to approach modern rewrites of Greek tragedy. Like works of other playwrights who undertake this venture, Mee's plays establish a dialectic relationship between tragedy as a corpus of literary texts and tragedy as a spectrum of tragic experiences of the contemporary world. This is the case, for

example, in Charles Mee's widely popular and perhaps most frequently staged play, *Big Love*. Based on Euripides's *The Suppliant Women*, this rewrite deals with gender wars, dysfunctional relationships and immigration, while *The Bacchae 2.1* addresses the present aspects of the timeless questions of the conflicts between the Self and the Other, the oppressed and the authority. Accordingly, the tragic experiences of war, and especially the imperial ventures of the US against other nations, are the epicentre of the five plays discussed in the present dissertation. The *Imperial Dreams Trilogy*, *Agamemnon 2.0* or *Thyestes 2.0*, put their spectators before a series of questions: whose war is this; in whose name is this war being fought; who has the right to fight a war thousands of miles away from home; is there also war at home; and, ultimately, what is there that can be done? My dissertation aims at exploring how these questions emerge through the five plays, and how tragedy assists the playwright to tackle them, finally proving that in Mee's case it is "a political or ethical commitment" what "shapes [the] writer's … decision to re-interpret [the] source text[s]" (Sanders 2).

1.3 Mee's Anti-war Poetics in *Iphigenia 2.0*, *Trojan Women: A Love Story*, and *Thyestes 2.0*

Helene P. Foley observes that politically oriented productions of Greek tragedy in the United States, performed mostly since the 1970s, follow three different approaches. A number of plays avoid heavy anachronism and rely on timing or style to make their public statement. They are, thus, close adaptations in response to a specific context or issue, whereas other theatre practitioners rewrite the source text with various degrees of anachronism and topicality. Finally, "[t]he third approach, which has gained considerable momentum in the United States, interpolates or interweaves modern material into a production of the original play and allows the juxtaposition to make a statement" (*Reimagining* 158). Mee's approach clearly falls into the last category. The process through which Mee composes his works, which is "the way Max Ernst made his Fatagaga pieces at the end of World War I" (*Trojan Women* 125; *Agamemnon* 54), does not function as a close-up lens but rather as a kaleidoscopic one. Mee transforms this surrealist collage technique of the visual arts into the form of a text by "incorporating shards of our contemporary world, to lie, as

in a bed of ruins, within the frame of the classical world" (*Trojan Women* 125). The interpolation and pillaging that Mee performs therefore can range from everyday texts to highly literary ones, such as translated pieces of the tragedies, fragments of other artists' literary works or Mee's own deeply philosophical reflections. This ensemble enables Mee's audiences to experience "the distinctive way in which poetry and its dynamics are being trusted and celebrated but also reviewed … since a political statement is articulated through an experimental, constantly evolving anti-war poetics" (Blatanis 59).

It is precisely this poetics that we see unfolding in *Iphigenia 2.0*, where the poetic overtone is evident since the very beginning of the play:

> In the darkness,
> we hear a male voice singing an ancient Macedonian folk song,
> wailing,
> almost keening.
> …
> Or it could be Dionisis Savopoulos and Sotiria Bellou sing Zeibekiko.
> …
> An Old Greek Man sits in the shadows, whitewashing the walls. (*Iphigenia* 1)

Even though Mee's rendition follows closely the structure of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, the whole play blurs the boundaries between the classical and the contemporary American world. The main premise, as in Euripides, is Agamemnon's vacillation over sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia so that the Greek army can set out for the Trojan expedition. In Mee's rendition, however, the sacrifice is not a whim of the gods, but a demand of Agamemnon's soldiers, who "will not put their lives at risk / unless [he] make[s] a sacrifice that means as much to [him] / as their lives mean to them" (*Iphigenia* 5). Agamemnon summons Iphigenia to the army camp under the pretext of her marrying to Achilles. His change of mind, although too late to change anything, provokes a heated intervention by Menelaus, who expresses his pro-war fervour by quoting verbatim testimonies of veterans who did not only partake in American military interventions but also actively justify their killings of civilians as instances in which they "couldn't take the chance" (*Iphigenia* 10). Clytemnestra, Iphigenia and her bridesmaids arrive at the camp, but their exuberance is shattered when

Agamemnon's plan is revealed. Clytemnestra's effort to persuade Achilles to protect her daughter does not succeed in overturning the course of events. Iphigenia finally consents to her sacrifice, and the play ends with bloodshed and disorder: Achilles and some of the bridesmaids throw bottles of pink champagne against the wall, "[t]his is followed by hurled wedding cake / and champagne glasses / and bouquets," and "[a]t the height of the chaos, Agamemnon slowly enters / carrying the dead Iphigenia in his arms," both of them covered in blood (*Iphigenia* 67).

As Foley argues, the fact that *Iphigenia in Aulis* depicts the Greeks actively choosing to engage in the Trojan War and examines the prices which innocent people paid "for their leaders' changing, inconsistent, and apparently dubious reasons for undertaking the venture," this play has been seen as particularly relevant in the light of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries US military ventures (*Reimagining* 232). In *Iphigenia 2.0*, this meditation on war is voiced by the soldiers of the play, who articulate fragments from Wilfred Owen's anti-war poem *Dulce et Decorum Est* (1920), written during World War I:

> Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
> But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame, all blind;
> Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
> Of gas-shells dropping softly behind. (*Iphigenia* 57)

Owen's verses like the above are quoted at length, not individually but by a chorus of soldiers. Taking into consideration that in classical tragedy the chorus was "in some degree detached from the action, commenting on it from the point of view of ordinary men or women and broadening the focus of the drama beyond the narrower concerns of the characters" (Brown 62–63), this choice ascribes a social rather than a personal dimension to the play's anti-war preoccupations. Poetry is articulated amid a genuinely—exaggeratedly even—contemporary milieu where Clytemnestra prepares a bachelorette party for her daughter, who appears "in the coolest, latest American teenage fashion" (*Iphigenia* 19). As Julie Sanders argues, "[t]his purposeful reassembly of fragments to form a new whole" is an active element in many postmodernist adaptations (4). It is this liminal space between the ancient and the contemporary world that puts forward Mee's anti-war critique; Achilles's meditative question "What chance can an empire have / if its actions are to be based / on lies and

imaginings?" (*Iphigenia* 18) becomes therefore utterly contemporary, and urgently asks for the intended audience's answer.

Accordingly oriented towards the themes of war and suffering is Mee's *Trojan Women: A Love Story*, a two-act play first produced in 1996. The first act, called "The Prologue," is inspired by Euripides's *The Trojan Women*. The anti-war preoccupations of the Euripidean play amply lend themselves to Mee's contemporary rewrite, which follows closely Euripides's plot but also features a number of modern references. The time of the play is the end of the Trojan War, which has left Troy—and its women—in ruins. The horror of war seems to continue for Hecuba, the former queen of Troy, and the rest of the women, whose future as slaves is announced to them by the Greek herald Talthybius, who, in Mee's rendering, is a State Department diplomat. As in the prototype, Hecuba's daughter Cassandra will be part of Agamemnon's war spoils, while Hector's widow Andromache will be married to Neoptolemus. In the endless war that follows the actual war, Andromache's son Astyanax is to be murdered, and so is Hecuba's youngest daughter, Polyxena. In Mee's work Polyxena has not already been killed as in Euripides, and the onstage interaction between mother and daughter make her impending death even more tragic. Having suffered and still suffering the atrocities of war, Hecuba actively engages in a quest to understand the reasons behind wars. The repeated articulation "Why was this done?" (*Trojan Women* 5, 6, 7) is emblematic of this effort, and Hecuba consciously refrains from any thoughts or acts of retribution. She refuses to perpetuate the cycle of wars, at least until the very end, when, seeing Polyxena's dead body, she finally "yields to revenge" (Lauriola 118–19), and assigns to Trojan survivor Aeneas the mission to destroy the Greeks.

The second act, called "The Play," is based on Hector Berlioz's opera *Les Troyens* (1858), inspired in turn by Virgil's *The Aeneid*. Actually shorter than "The Prologue," this act follows Aeneas's journey on his quest to found a new powerful city which will destroy the Greeks and avenge the massacre of Troy. In particular, the act engages with Aeneas's stop in Carthage and his relationship with queen Dido. Carthage in Mee is depicted as the exact opposite of the previous act: instead of the detrimental effects of imperialist wars and the dehumanisation of the previous act, we are now presented with Dido's queendom as a peaceful feminist utopia, where Aeneas and his soldiers are loved and nurtured in the environment of a modern recreational

spa. The potential of a peaceful life, however, is overturned by Aeneas's promise to Hecuba. Aeneas is determined to abandon Dido and continue his quest. In contrast to Berlioz's plot, Dido does not kill herself, but instead attempts to drown Aeneas, who is left on stage "nearly dead" (*Trojan Women* 124).

Marianne McDonald's critical approach on Mee's *Trojan Women* focuses on the violence of the play in a way which is worth examining. Firstly, McDonald acknowledges that "Mee shows us the horror of the human condition, without the grandeur that we found in Greek tragedy. Perhaps this is an apt reflection of modern times. It reflects the violence of American society with its daily shootings, to say nothing of the occasional war" (*Living Art* 40). Soon, however, she puts forward the idea that "[t]his play resembles Sarah Kane's dramatizations of cruelty for its own sake. It is very like films that pander to an audience's taste for violence to increase their sales," escalating to the conclusion that "[s]omething is destroyed here, something obscene is added, and these works offer entertainment comparable to the killings enacted to amuse the populace in Rome" (*Living Art* 40). Totally in contrast to McDonald's last arguments, what is suggested here is that Mee's collage-like interpolation of highly literary pieces along with violent fragments meaningfully serve as an alarm in the audience's minds against modern America's imperial enterprises. Exactly like Euripides's *Trojan Women* narrate the violence the victors practised against the Trojans, Mee introduces the violent scenes not to satisfy his audience's taste for violence but instead to prove how the process of retelling an ancient story applies to the audience's immediate experience. It is precisely for this reason, I believe, that poetry and violence in Mee's works do not coexist like the two sides of a coin do, but in a manner that the two are not mutually exclusive.

McDonald herself comes to a similar conclusion in her other seminal work, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light*, where she observes that modern playwrights who undertake the venture of rewriting tragedies "do what dramatists should do—that is to depict the world in which we live. The world they depict is fragmented; they litter their stages with the debris of modern life" (6). Interestingly, this debris which is figuratively used by McDonald to visualise the fragmentation of the modern world, can also allude to the debris that war leaves behind, which is precisely what is represented in Mee's plays. *Trojan Women: A Love Story* is a typical example, since the chorus of "100 dark-skinned '3rd world' women making computer components at

little work tables" (*Trojan Women* 1), is assigned to voice verbatim extracts of testimonies by survivors of atrocities such as the Holocaust and Hiroshima. This intertextual corpus rehistoricises the Trojan women's lamentation about their shattered homeland, their decimated families and their impending slavery. Reworked in this manner, tragedy invites the intended audience to condemn war, providing "new ways of talking about tragic form that create historical accountability, radical critique and introduce the possibility of change" (Taxidou 16).

Night or *Thyestes 2.0*, staged for the first time in 2015, follows the same thread. *Night* is a companion piece to *Day (Daphnis and Chloe 2.0)*, and according to the playwright, the two pieces can be performed either individually or together, under the title *Night and Day*. Unlike the rest of the plays examined so far, which closely follow the structure of their classical counterparts, *Thyestes 2.0* is a much looser adaptation. As a matter of fact, the homonymous tragedy by Sophocles is not among the surviving ones, yet the story of Thyestes was well-known as part of the Trojan mythic cycle, and traces of it can be found in other tragedians' works. For instance, in Euripides' *Electra* the chorus gives an account of the early incidents triggering the power conflict between the two brothers Atreus and Thyestes, while Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* features a brief narration of the so called Thyestean Feast, where Thyestes unknowingly dined on the flesh of his two sons, who had been killed and cooked by his brother Atreus. Mee has therefore freely borrowed elements from the myth and from the Senecan version of it, without even slightly aiming at following the typical structure of a tragedy. However, there are two main pillars in Mee's narrative which directly allude to the myth of Thyestes: the opening of the play, which is a telegraphic and rather ironic narration of the myth, and the crucial deployment of the banquet theme, which is transformed into a modern dinner party.

At the beginning of the play, a narrator stands downstage and recounts not only the deeds of Atreus and Thyestes, but all acts of infanticide, cannibalism, rape and incest that have been committed by and within the family in a time span of five generations. Thus, the narrator acquaints the audience with the story of Tantalus, who killed and cooked his own son, Pelops, in order to feed him to the gods to test their omniscience, as well as the gods' reaction to revive Pelops and eternally "tantalize" (*Thyestes* 2) Tantalus in Hades; the story of Pelops, who—by killing a charioteer—is responsible for a curse upon all his descendants, "as though they needed another

curse" (*Thyestes* 2); the story of Atreus, who "serves [the sons of Thyestes] to their father with a robust red wine" (*Thyestes* 3); and a long procession of violent events, ultimately resulting in the patricide of Agamemnon by Orestes and Electra.

The narrator's recounting produces a comic effect, but also acquaints the audience with the myth which sets the framework for Mee's extended metaphor. The modern Thyestean Feast consists of a constellation of unnamed characters mingling at a modern dinner party. The banqueters appraise human civilisation, expressing their certainty that "if there was once a time that we were animals … we have made progress," and everything is now guaranteed:

> SECOND WOMAN. The sense of social responsibility
>
> FIRST WOMAN. Tolerance, openness to others
>
> SECOND WOMAN. Human rights. (*Thyestes* 12)

Abruptly, though, they go on to narrate a series of war scenes, which are characterised by the pervasive idea that in each separate case violence and war were not only necessary but also fair. A large part of these scenes do not come from Mee's fictional world; instead, they are extracts from war logs and testimonies by people who participated in various US imperialist enterprises. The banquet theme that is offered by the myth is key to interpreting Mee's metaphor. Before us we do not see Thyestes and Atreus's *agon*—no Thyestes and Atreus roles are assigned to the actors. What we see is the struggle of a nation on its way towards an *anagnorisis*: the *anagnorisis* of a rhetoric which not only conceals but actually distorts the causes and effects of the US imperial ventures. The metaphor of the dinner party is therefore creatively deployed in order to establish resonances related to whether the audience is willing to continue "swallowing" and "digesting" violence and the rhetoric which supports it. Perhaps more pronouncedly than any of Mee's rewrites, the critique raised by *Thyestes 2.0* is not confined to the condemnation of imperial wars but extends to a fierce critique against the organised effort to make them accepted as fair. The tragic myth of Thyestes lends itself to Mee's rewrite, which aspires to provide a stimulus for contemporary reflection, urging the play's audience to critically and actively engage with the metaphor of the play.

1.4 History, War, and Trauma in *Agamemnon 2.0* and *Orestes 2.0*

Agamemnon 2.0, first staged in 1994, captures Mee's anti-war sentiments against the first Gulf War. Plot-wise it follows the prototype, presenting Agamemnon's homecoming after the end of the Trojan War and his and Cassandra's assassination by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. However, Mee has inserted four more characters to give voice to preoccupations about the present and the past: on stage we see Herodotus, Hesiod, Thucidides, and Homer, who acquaint the audience with the mythic strands of the Trojan War but also continue intervening throughout the play. All four of them are disabled: Herodotus is a quadriplegic on a wheelchair; Thucidides is "a dwarf, or double amputee" (*Agamemnon* 1); Homer is blind; Hesiod is an epileptic and "tremors run through his body from time to time for which he must sometimes pause to bring them under control" (*Agamemnon* 1). Through this insertion, *Agamemnon 2.0* more explicitly than any of the other plays expresses Mee's reflections on history, memory, and war. When Thucidides says that "[w]hat one remembers / and what is true / are so seldom the same" (*Agamemnon* 2), his statement should be interpreted politically rather than psychologically. The disability of the historians can be seen as Mee's metaphor to visualise his concerns about the objectivity of history. The Gulf War—and many wars to follow—was advertised as a just war, a rhetoric which more often than not makes its way straight into the history handbooks. In Mee's double metaphor this distorted version of reality is what amputates the historians of the play, while they are denied accessibility to writing the real history from the part of the US people exactly like disabled people have been denied accessibility for centuries to partake in mainstream activities of social life.

Mee's personal experience is pervasive in *Agamemnon 2.0*. On the one hand, contracting polio in his teenage years left him paralysed for a long time, acquainting him with disability from a very young age, and leaving him to then lead "a nearly normal life," as is the title of his memoir about his battle with the disease. On the other hand, Mee's career as a historian before he was fully devoted to playwriting certainly informs his plays, not only in the sense that he regularly chooses to deal with historical instances but mainly because of the critical perspective that playwriting amply allows him to adopt. This experiential background does not make Mee's metaphor any less political. As he once admitted while interviewed by scholar and theatre practitioner Scott T. Cummings, his years as a historian made him feel "like a

fraud" because he was supposed to "formulate dispassionate statements about events that really make you want to scream and cry out and weep," adding that he thinks that theatre "is more the place where [he] can write about the world and not pretend that [his] view is dispassionate" (Cummings 14). What is argued here is that revisiting Greek tragedy does not only offer Mee the space to passionately address political and social issues, but ultimately lends itself as a means to revisit official historiography. By interweaving tragedy with the contemporary texts recounting the horrors of American imperialist ventures—which are to a large extent recycled throughout the five plays—*Agamemnon 2.0* invites spectators to reflect upon the crimes committed in their own name. As Foley suggests, "Mee's deliberate anachronisms superimposed on a visibly Aeschylean text painfully renew the relevance of the original while exposing an even greater fragmentation and coherence in the contemporary world" (*The Millennium Project* 335).

At the same time, the characters of the historians and their meditations on the role of history and memory highlight the urgent need for reevaluation of contemporary American reality. Hesiod's intervention characteristically exemplifies the play's effort to engage in a dialogue with the intended audience:

> Sometimes
> when I am by myself
> I carry on a dialogue
> with the past,
> listening carefully
> for the voices of those who have left us.
> …
> I call up the shades
> these silent bodies
> silent souls
> so they might feed on our compassion
> and I might learn the source
> of our present woes. (*Agamemnon* 8–9)

As if wishing to delineate the exactitude the profession of the historian requires, Hesiod conjures the spirits of the ancestors precisely like Mee conjures the works of the tragedians to assist his contemporary social and political preoccupations. Hesiod's

meditation on the need of a people to remember its history as a lesson for the present and the future mirrors Mee's effort of deploying tragedy to incite the spectators' critical reflection. In this sense, Mee's rewriting practice ascertains Roland Barthes's proposition that "the ancient tragedy concerns us in that it allows us to understand clearly, by all the means of the theater, that history is plastic, fluid, at the service of men, if only they try to make themselves its master in all lucidity" (66).

The themes of history and disability further extend to the play *Orestes 2.0*, which is Mee's contribution to a series of performances approaching the Euripidean play, as Foley argues, through the lens of the theatre of the absurd (*Generic Ambiguity* 148). As Mee himself says, he "took the Greek play *Orestes*, stuck a bunch of stuff on it, threw the scaffolding away, and what was left retained the form of what was now absent, only it was different" (Cummings 60). Indeed, the play retains most aspects of Euripides's plot: Orestes is delirious, haunted by the Furies; both Orestes and Electra are initially sentenced to death for matricide, a sentence which is finally avoided with the execution of Pylades's plan to kill Helen and abduct Hermione; the play's happy ending is ensured with the intervention of the *deus ex machina*, and Apollo is the one who decides on the future of the mortals. Yet, the palace of Argos is replaced by "a palatial white Newport-style or Palm Beach-style beach house," "the setting is both inside and out" and we find Orestes surrounded by "war victims … who wear camouflage hospital gowns" (*Orestes* 1) in what seems to be the mental ward of a military hospital. This ward is the setting in which Mee introduces his version of the chorus, consisting of nurses as well as physically and mentally traumatised soldiers. One of them, Tapemouth Man, most of the time kept tied and gagged by the nurses and the other inmates, manages to break free three times, during which he quotes at length extracts from Elaine Scarry's book *The Body in Pain* (1987).

Scarry's book, a seminal one in cultural studies, examines the phenomenology of pain, exploring questions such as how the state inscribes itself on the body both in times of peace and war, how war unmakes one's world and how art remakes it. In his second monologue, Tapemouth Man describes how "[t]he arms and legs that are, in peacetime, lent out to the state for a few seconds and then reclaimed may in war be permanently loaned in injured and lost limbs" (*Orestes* 46) and reflects upon "the literalness with which the human body opens itself and allows the nation to be registered in the wound" (*Orestes* 47). While in *Agamemnon 2.0* disability can be

seen as a people's lack of accessibility to its own history, in *Orestes 2.0* disability—physical or mental—is the permanent inscription of war on the body. Apart from the Tapemouth Man, who—despite being gagged—speaks the truths of the play, all the inmates of the ward, including Orestes, are physically and mentally broken and dehumanised beyond repair. Their interactions showcase that they cannot tell right from wrong, and their engagement in violent physical or verbal behaviours betrays that violence has been permanently inscribed on them.

The play's beam of hope lies clearly on the character of the Tapemouth Man, who seems to be the only one that keeps resisting to the dehumanisation caused by the multileveled violence. Whereas in *Agamemnon 2.0* the disabled historians can be seen as the alter ego of Mee the historian, in *Orestes 2.0* Tapemouth Man can be seen as the doppelganger of Mee the artist. The latter becomes evident in Tapemouth Man's last intervention, in which, "[c]heerfully, like a smiling Buddha" he meditates on the role of imagination:

> It sees the residues,
> the memories, and the reports of past or faraway social worlds
> and of neglected or obscure perceptions
> as the main stuff with which we remake our contexts.
> It explains the operation of a social order
> by representing what the remaking of this order would require.
> …
> By all these means
> it undermines
> the identification of the actual
> with the possible. (*Orestes* 58)

As if referring to Mee's own creative practice, Tapemouth Man suggests that art can help us reframe our perception of events. Indeed, *Orestes 2.0*, like the rest of Mee's anti-war rewrites, visualises the suffering and devastation caused by imperialist violence not only in faraway lands but also within contemporary US society. The new context created by the tragedy's dialogue with the present fosters critical reflection but also asks for an active contribution to the condemnation of imperialism, showcasing—to borrow Tapemouth Man's words—what the remaking of the existent order requires.

1.5 Concluding Remarks

This chapter examined Mee's contribution to the long thread of anti-war drama through his creative adaptations of Greek tragedy. The playwright uses the ancient plays as a scaffolding which allows him to build his own creation on a structure that appears to be steady and at the same time yielding. As was demonstrated in this chapter, Mee takes advantage of several elements of tragedy that can assist him in expressing his sociopolitical preoccupations, such as the mythic strands of both the precedents and the aftermath of the Trojan War, as well as the role of the chorus in classical drama. At the same time, however, he creatively tampers with these elements in order to rehistoricise the tragedies in a modern context. Mee's unique style of juxtaposing classical which contemporary fragments forms and informs his anti-war poetics, which depicts the suffering inflicted by the imperialist ventures of the United States, both outside and inside the country. This juxtaposition produces a mixture of high literariness along with extreme violence, which puts forward highly topical questions regarding the devastating effects of imperial politics. Mee's rewrites therefore formulate a piercing critique of contemporary reality, which urgently ask for the audience's reflection and reaction.

Notes

[1] For a detailed analysis of this shift in relation to the sociohistorical framework of Shakespeare's time, see S. Marx, pp. 49–95.

2. REWRITING TRAGEDY AS A MEANS OF REASSESSING CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

2.1 Introduction

As it has already been mentioned in previous parts of the present dissertation, an aspect which I aim at exploring is how Greek tragedy, distilled through Mee's pen, can serve as a means of reassessing contemporary American history. In the previous chapter I attempted to delineate how the process of rewriting the classics has been a medium for Charles Mee—as it has been for numerous American playwrights and theatre practitioners—to express his anti-war preoccupations. This chapter will focus on the different strands of public critique Mee's plays aspire to raise during their interaction with the audience. Apart from the playwright's critique against the American imperial ventures, which is pervasive throughout the plays, Mee's renderings of the tragedies raise a broader public debate, since they cover a wide range of aspects of the American public sphere, and touch upon further interrelated issues of public life. This chapter, therefore, will attempt to designate how Mee's plays betray on a textual level what the playwright himself openly admits when asked to comment on his work, namely his will to write plays which can have an impact on his audiences and on society on a political level.

The latter is evident in a number of Mee's interviews, one of which featured in the *New York Times* in 1990, before Mee had engaged in writing his "Greek" plays. The extract is quoted in Cummings's extended work on the playwright and is indicative of the public orientation Mee's works aspire to have:

> If artists are not taking the heat, if their reviews are always good … if the politicians are quiet, then the artists have failed their fellow citizens, not just the poor and the outcast, but all their fellow citizens. So, it is not up to those of us who make and produce and finance art to seek less trouble from politicians; it is up to us to seek more trouble … Let us rather learn to jump into a nasty political fight and bite back. Let us learn to demand our rights without shame and without apology. (21–22)

Mee therefore sees theatre and playwriting as political tools, and his rewrites of Greek tragedy urge spectators to reflect on their own role in public life. His works ask hard

questions, and encourage the audiences' engagement in the political "troublemaking" he describes. James F. Schlatter's analysis on a number of staged productions of Mee's "Greek" plays pertinently reads the plays' public orientation. While Schlatter acknowledges that "[a]s formulated by Mee, … the ultimate public question of whether, as a national culture, [Americans] possess the intellectual and spiritual resources to survive, does not allow easy answers," he finds that the theatre practitioners who undertake to stage Mee's plays seem "fully committed to finding them, or perhaps more accurately, to revitalizing a theatrical arena, a true public space, in which that question may effectively be voiced and debated" (9). Tragedy in this sense serves as the primary material for a radical reevaluation of the contemporary American sociopolitical sphere, and what Mee's rewrites ultimately are attempting to do is "to revitalize … the function of the theatre itself, inherited from Euripides and the Greeks, as a forum of public discourse" (Schlatter 9).

The present chapter therefore aims at exploring how the five plays discussed in my dissertation contribute to this discourse by inviting the intended audience to reflect upon a number of aspects related to contemporary American reality. The elements of classical tragedy that inform this process will be closely examined, and specific focus will be laid on how the element of fate has been deployed in order to depict modern attitudes towards war. Specific attention will moreover be paid to the critique the plays articulate against the role of institutions such as the legal system and diplomacy. Finally, this chapter will look into the class perspective of Mee's rewrites, which is expressed in a number of instances throughout the plays. By analysing all the different strands of public critique as they emerge through the plays, I will thus attempt to delineate how "[i]n tracing the penumbra of ancient Greek tragedies, [Mee's] radical revisions … as much by the forcefulness of their expression as their overt political content, offer resistance to the mechanism by which the dominant social and economic order writes itself on the body politic" (Cummings 68).

2.2 Tragic Fate as a Signifier for Modern Attitudes towards War

Informed by the mythic strands that recount the precedents and mainly the aftermath of the Trojan War, while at the same time diving deeply into contemporary

American reality, Mee's anti-war poetics does not approach war as a given which can only be literarily criticised. Instead, the audiences of all five plays are invited to discover what war means for the characters of the plays. By doing so, they "witness" the standpoints of both the instigators and the victims of imperialist ventures, but they also discover a wide and complex set of attitudes towards such ventures. And even though it is usually easy for audiences to sympathise with the victims, the difficulty for each spectator here is to discern whether or to what extent they might identify with onstage attitudes which are more or less convinced or corroded by the rhetoric of the instigators. Tragedy in this perspective assists such contemplations not only by providing the tragic heroes or sufferers who express this range of voices but also by lending the modern plays certain key elements, as is for instance the role of fate. The crucial role of fate in classical Greek drama is deployed by Mee as a metaphor for the state's rhetoric on the inevitability of war, yet the most striking is that fate is brought up not only by the instigators but also by the victims of war.

At the beginning of *Iphigenia 2.0*, Agamemnon describes the growth of an empire as a step by step process: at first the empire has to protect its borders, which then extend beyond its ability to defend them, and eventually, as its interests grow, the empire will have made new enemies and "will have created the causes of wars / where there were none before" (3). The contemplation, however, that this sequence of events might result in the death of the empire leads him to the conclusion that empires are subjugated by fate. Thus, even though his initial thoughts betray the conscious and calculated decisions that are made in order to build and sustain an empire, Agamemnon's conclusion finally denies responsibility and conveniently displaces it to a destiny which is unable to be controlled. This lack of control is regularly brought up by the victims of the plays. *Iphigenia 2.0* concludes—by no means departing from the Euripidean play—with Iphigenia consenting to her death and acknowledging that her sacrifice is something she cannot escape:

> this was my destiny
> and I embrace it
> I grab hold of it with both hands
> and I will never let it go
> because I don't want to be a useless
> pointless human being

when I have a chance to have had a life
that will be remembered forever (*Iphigenia* 64)

This interplay between fate and will is precisely what underlines the multiplicity of views on the matter of war: whereas for Agamemnon the venture to conquer Troy is acknowledged as a fair and necessary decision which he actively and consciously undertakes, Iphigenia accepts her death as her destiny. Mee's Iphigenia therefore becomes an excellent example of Foley's pertinent observation that in most contemporary adaptations of *Iphigenia in Aulis*, "Iphigeneia's conversion to accepting her sacrifice has served to confront a public rhetoric and a media that can abuse and even brainwash their victims" (*Reimagining* 232).

The motif of fate is pervasive in more instances throughout Mee's plays. In "The Prologue" of his *Trojan Women*, it is young Polyxena that accepts her upcoming murder by the Greek army, and her interpretation of the facts sounds very similar to Iphigenia's sacrificial speech:

I don't feel sorry, mother,
it's my fate.
If you have an eight for a name
then you can have an eight and a four
or an eight and a thirteen
you come to combinations of 21,
or three
you know then that's your fate. (*Trojan Women* 47)

This reference to fate is deployed once again to depict how the rhetoric of the "unavoidable" war is internalised by the victims of war themselves. The fact, however, that tragic fate here takes the form of pseudoscience features a mocking undertone which enables the audience to question the credibility of Polyxena's train of thought. In other words, unless the spectators share Polyxena's paradoxical beliefs, numerology is the element which breaks the audience's complete sympathy for Polyxena as the upcoming victim of a war already won, creating the space for the audience to debate her argument and perhaps identify it as an argument of the instigators of the war.

Mee has deployed the element of fate particularly creatively in order to formulate his narrative in different parts of his plays. After numerology, it is tarot

reading which appears in "The Play," the second part of the *Trojan Women*. The scene in which Dido reads the cards for Aeneas forebodes Aeneas's desire to leave her, and his subsequent murder by her. On a second level, however, Aeneas's accusations that Dido may have tampered with the cards, and most importantly his taking over of the process—though it is made clear that he neither knows nor believes in tarot reading—introduces the notion of taking so-called fate in one's hands and making one's own decisions. "We make our own chances. There's never an end of chances until you're dead" (*Trojan Women* 102) is Aeneas's triumph over the passive acceptance of destiny, and this is a lingering element in more of Mee's plays. In *Orestes 2.0*, when Electra receives a call from her astrologer Farley, she anxiously asks him about planet conjunctions because she thinks that she might have "some kind of trouble" with hers or that they may have something to do with her mother (21–22). Farley proceeds to a lengthy instruction about the role of conjunctions, but processing this information, Electra seems to finally question the role of destiny in her case:

> There was a time I might have had a life of many choices. You might say: well, what choice do you have? Being a woman of a certain position and so forth, so much seems given. And yet some people do have the privilege, the wealth, all those things to do anything they want to do. You think, well: if you had been born in some other country, under other circumstances, you might say you had no choice. But you, let's face it, the life you have will be the life you make. (*Orestes* 23)

Electra, thus, not only draws a clear line between her own privileged position and the one of the underprivileged sufferers, but also corroborates her free will as regards her complicity to the past and upcoming criminal actions of the play. In the modern context, these lines highlight how the victims of wars are unable to control their own present and future, unlike the imperial powers of the privileged world, which are responsible for the suffering and destruction caused by imperial wars.

Fate is finally prominent in the last scene of *Thyestes 2.0*. Before the end of the play, First Man contemplates how life is an ever changing cycle where pleasure and pain take turns, and how human beings are both capable and incapable of taking action:

> No man should put his trust in the smile of fortune,
> no man abandon hope in a time of trouble.

> The Spinner of Fate twines good and bad together,
> never lets fortune rest, keeps all things moving.
> Life's circle is ever revolving,
> the swift wheel turning. (*Thyestes* 31)

First Man's words seem to be generally designating the coincidental misfortunes or grief as part of a human's life. Yet, seen in the context of the war orientation of the play, his advice lies more on the notion of patience than the active involvement of the human as citizen, ultimately supporting the passive acceptance of what fortune and fate bring. On the other hand, Second Man's thoughts which are the ones concluding the play adopt a more active stance:

> Are we chosen out of all earth's children
> to perish in the last catastrophe
> of a disjointed universe?
> Are we to see the world's end come?
> A cruel fate brought us to birth,
> if we have lived to lose the sun,
> or if our sins have driven him away.
> But we must not complain, or fear;
> too fond of life is he who would not die
> when all the world dies with him. (*Thyestes* 31–32)

Fate emerges once again, yet this time it is combined with the notion of sin. The latter should be seen, I believe, not with its Christian resonances but precisely in the sense of *hamartia*. In the framework of the absolute chaos of war and violence as we see it in *Thyestes 2.0*, this *hamartia* which may drive the sun away is war and the destructive power of imperialist expansionism. Interestingly, this element allows this specific play to abandon fatalism altogether and to return to causality. Whereas fate in other plays remained unquestioned by aggressors and victims alike, the final words in *Thyestes 2.0* forcefully brandish the prevalence of free will: on the one hand, the state is fully aware but also accountable for the detrimental effects of imperialism; on the other hand, the citizens are urged to take responsibility and leave their mark on history. The Second Man's words ultimately give out a beam of hope, following the radical perspective which seems to be fostered in Mee's plays, and which will be further explored within the present chapter.

2.3 The Failure of the Legal System and Diplomacy

One of the aspects of public life that Mee's plays prompt their audiences to reflect upon is the role of the legal system. The trial scene in *Orestes 2.0* creates a multileveled critique on the function of the judicial system in contemporary US society, while at the same time, the chaotic manner in which the private and the public sphere interfere with each other throughout the scene also puts forward questions related to the denigration of social issues and civic participation. The stage directions before the trial scene clarify that two different strands of text are delivered interchangeably or sometimes simultaneously. Interestingly, the trial itself unfolds in the background, while the forestage hosts various personal accounts of the nurses, whose intimate stories and sex experiences make the trial inaudible most of the time. Even though Mee's rewrite does not take sides as regards Orestes's innocence or guilt—precisely like the play's classical counterpart—it masterfully reworks the trial to pose a number of highly relevant questions about the judicial system and justice itself. Therefore, it is not Orestes and Electra's death sentence that will prompt the audience's reflection on contemporary public matters, but rather a number of details incorporated within this scene. The authorial comment that "the judicial system is in ruins" (*Orestes* 47), which takes its place among the rest of the stage directions, is anything but subtle. Yet, Mee has created an elaborate social commentary throughout the whole scene, which could perhaps be even more effective in allowing the audience to draw parallels between the play and contemporary US.

Firstly, the fact that Nod, John and William, the American soldiers who are now the inmates of the hospital ward of the play, serve as prosecutors or other parties in the judicial process, given the negative presentation of the three characters throughout the play, excludes the possibility of a fair trial. The three characters' active participation in war crimes and their insistence to keep silencing the Tapemouth Man, who is the one who speaks the truths of the play and contemplates the artistic, transformative force of art, make them unfit to promise anything close to justice. Instead, when they express "with indifference" (*Orestes* 51) the punishment they desire Orestes and Electra to have, the play highlights the idea of perpetuated violence

even at times of supposed peace: "I think they should be stoned to death. Their throats slit. Their eyes gouged out. Their gold teeth pulled. Their flesh should be boiled off their skulls to make table ornaments for sweethearts. And their bones should be carved into letter openers" (*Orestes* 51–52). Justice is therefore a possibility refused in Mee's text not only by the status quo as represented by Menelaus but also by the American citizens on whom violence seems to have deeply inscribed itself.

The very inaudibility of the trial—the trial is almost impossible to hear due to the louder foreground text—also has its own major significance. In McDonald's reading of the scene "[t]he suggestion seems to be that he who shouts loudest carries the day" (*Orestes' Mania* 75), while for Peter A. Campbell "[w]hat Mee does by foregrounding the 'intimate' text is to subvert the importance of the 'public' narrative" (74). Since the audience is prevented from hearing the trial strand by the sex talks which are closer and louder, Campbell argues that Mee plays upon the idea that we tend to be more interested in the private. In this sense, "true public discourse is simply not that compelling, and the judgments that come from it are equally unimportant and decidedly undemocratic" (74). Campbell moreover underlines that the onstage audience's apathy towards the trial is emblematic of the interests that the offstage audience is supposed to have, focusing on the private rather than on the public or political (74). This very pertinent remark about the onstage audience's apathy, I would argue, lies in the heart of what this chapter aspires to delineate, namely the social debate Mee's rewrites of Greek tragedy invite. In this sense, the apathy and the preference towards the private sphere rather than the public one are aspects which emerge not as a superficial judgement or critique but ones which urgently ask the offstage audience not only to acknowledge but also to differentiate from.

In the trial scene, the chorus also plays with a quote that comes directly from the public and judicial life of contemporary US history:

> JOHN. Well, somebody put pubic hair on my coke can.
>
> NOD. So, somebody put pubic hair on my coke can, too. (*Orestes* 53)

This reference hints back to 1991, the year when George H. W. Bush nominated Clarence Thomas for the Supreme Court of the United States. At the time, feminist and civil rights groups opposed to his nomination focusing on his conservative political positions, such as his view on abortion. The nomination proceedings, though,

became even more turbulent—and gained enormous publicity—when Annita Hill, having for years worked under Thomas, accused him of sexual harassment. Hill's allegations about Thomas's sexual talks and provocations were not only underestimated but also deployed to denigrate her instead of Thomas, who won confirmation and is an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States until the present day. The interplay between John and Nod about pubic hair on a coke can resonates one of the incidents quoted by Hill to describe inappropriate sexual talk at workplace; however, it is certainly not the specifics of this particular case that Mee's play wishes to remind the audience.[1] On the one hand, these glimpses shape the environment of real-life court cases, so that the trial scene "because of its rigid formalism shows the failure of the legal process to produce justice" (McDonald, *Orestes' Mania* 75). On the other hand, what these references seem to be offering the play is a prompt to raise questions about the judicial system itself, both as regards the people who partake in its mechanism and its contribution to justice. As James F. Schlatter pertinently observes, "[p]ast historical figures and cultural/political forms collide and commingle with contemporary images and icons of American public life," while the audience "witnesses a kind of Einsteinian prospect of history continually spiralling back on itself and confronting—and potentially renewing—itself through repeated encounters with its own past" (5). It is precisely in this manner that the text invites its audiences to reflect not only upon the malfunction(s) of the judicial system and the failure of justice but also upon whether this spiral can be affected by their own active engagement in public life. Ultimately, by stirring together fragments by Euripides, Charles Bukowski and non-fiction, Mee manages to deliver what he first promised in the stage directions for this particular scene: "This is the Crazy Trial" (*Orestes* 47), whose form and content alike unfold in full absurdity, and which calls for the audience's reflection and critical reaction.

Apart from the role of the legal system, the role of diplomacy is also challenged. In Mee's *Trojan Women*, Talthybius is not just the herald of the Greeks, but a diplomat, who is dressed in the standard State Department pin-stripe suit and is accompanied by two Special Forces agents. Despite claiming his neutrality and compassion to the Trojan women's suffering that continues well after the war, various incidents throughout the play betray his active engagement in the process of implementing the victors' decisions on the future of the women. When Cassandra

accepts to be taken to the Greek ship with the rest of Agamemnon's loot, Hecuba resists and Talthybius's remark comes with both irony and an undertone of threat: "I had hoped we could proceed with some sense of self-respect / but I see this is not to be the case" (*Trojan Women* 43). Soon after this, when Hecuba proclaims the perversity of the Greeks' wish to sacrifice young Polyxena as the bride of dead Achilles, Talthybius fully defends the logic of such an act: "His fellow soldiers will not see him buried / without a proper sacrifice / to give honor to HIS sacrifice"[2] (*Trojan Women* 44). These two instances, which are indicative, I believe, of Talthybius's overall standpoint, designate that he is neither neutral nor passive. Seen in the framework of the anti-war orientation of the play, the fact that Mee takes Euripides's messenger and transforms him into a diplomat seems to challenge the potential beneficial effects of contemporary diplomacy. On the contrary, Talthybius's role and overall stance reads as a palindrome of Clausewitz's famous quote that war is politics continued by other means: here politics—in the form of diplomacy—is war continued by other means. It is instructive to note that Michel Foucault has intriguingly responded to Clausewitz's assertion, proposing that power is a war continued by other means. Foucault suggests that the relations of power in periods of supposed peace derive from a definite relation of forces that is established in war and by war, while the reign of peace in civil society by no means suspends the prior disequilibrium of forces. Furthermore, Foucault argues that politics sanctions and upholds this disequilibrium, perpetually re-inscribing it "through a form of unspoken warfare" (90–91). Hecuba's words, thus, that "[t]he war is ended / and yet it goes on without an end" (*Trojan Women* 4), literarily transcribe the aforementioned reasoning, while Talthybius and his armed partners, who are ready to shoot any time, are an on-stage reminder of her bitter observation.

As to why Mee resorts to tragedy in order to give shape to these contemporary social and political preoccupations, Schlatter's eloquent observations merit, I believe, to be quoted at length:

> Mee seems drawn to Euripides' plays precisely because they pose hard moral questions in a world of irredeemable crimes and irreversible human catastrophe and then dare the audience to answer them. *Orestes* and *The Trojan Women* both set the terms of a moral debate by positing the commitment of a primal crime or public atrocity so egregious that the claim

> for justice seems itself another outrage. The last bonds of community—of history, of caring, of understanding—have been cut along with Clytemnestra's and Polyxena's throat. But ultimately, these crimes are self-inflicted, committed against the living body politic. (Schlatter 9)

2.4 Class Preoccupations and the Need for an Offstage Catharsis

Mee's piercing depiction of contemporary American society does not take for granted the proclaimed equal chances of representative democracy, but is informed by a clear class perspective, which is most pronouncedly expressed in *Agamemnon 2.0*. Despite the addition of the chorus of historians in *Agamemnon 2.0*, which is a departure from the prototype, Mee does not dismiss altogether the character of the Messenger who appears in the prototype mediating the events of the Trojan War. The Messenger's role is reduced in length since the contemplations on the atrocities of war have been to a large extent voiced by the historians, yet his presence is no less significant. In Mee's rendition of the tragedy, the juxtaposition of the Messenger—and former soldier in the Trojan War—with Agamemnon is deployed to shed light on the economic aspects of imperialist enterprises. After describing the state of utter destruction in Troy and all the different shades the faces of the dead can take, he proceeds to reveal the loot he has brought home:

> [he opens a burlap bag,
> brings out battered, dirt-encrusted gold cups
> and/or rusted 19th century wagon wheels
> a broken glass of indeterminate age
> and other ruined precious or not-so-precious items
> from various epochs] (*Agamemnon* 22)

Mee's stage directions are indicative of the objects that can be used by directors and scenographers in a performance; however, the significance, the value, and the condition of the Messenger's spoils effortlessly shape a critique as regards the benefits a people has when participating in an imperial war. Furthermore, when the Messenger recites the lines on the scroll accompanying the spoils, Mee's text deploys the myth in order to embed the US state rhetoric about the benefits of the war:

> The Argive army conquered Troy
> And brought home over land and sea
> These hard-won spoils, the pride and joy
> of ancient palaces, to be
> Trophies of victory, and grace
> the temples of the Hellene race (*Agamemnon* 22)

The passionate lines of the scroll, very much sounding like a pep talk to lift the morale of soldiers and civilians alike, in contrast to the visualised worthlessness of the Messenger's loot, are presented before the spectators, who are invited to interpret the scene in their contemporary context.

When Agamemnon appears on stage, carrying his own loot, the difference is striking:

> His hands and face are deeply stained with blood.
> His clothes are filthy and torn and stained with blood.
> He has a large hawser over his shoulder, and with it, he drags behind him
> packing boxes, steamer trunks, other things containing the spoils of war.
> Many more spoils than the Messenger was entitled to. (*Agamemnon* 25–26)

Although no stage directions are provided as regards what Agamemnon's loot specifically consists of, the text makes no effort to conceal or polish the striking contrast. No matter what the practitioners choose in order to visualise the amount and quality of the spoils, the text here is even more telling than the image: the soldier was not *entitled* to the same perks as Agamemnon. This juxtaposition surpasses the sphere of politics, and clearly introduces the social divide in the public debate the play aspires to raise. On the one hand, Agamemnon as the personification of the dominant class is the one who benefits from imperial wars, while the dominated class is given "glass-beads-for-land." On the other hand, while the Messenger has lost an arm in the battlefield, Agamemnon has his own arms, face, and hands stained with blood. Mee's narrative here reflects the audience's actual contemporary world, where it is not only the benefits that are dissimilar for the two classes, but also the risks. The Messenger has returned amputated, with the state clearly inscribed on his body in the manner Chapter 1 of the present dissertation discusses, while Agamemnon's hands are stained not only by the Trojans' blood but also by the blood of his own country's army.

The class perspective of Mee's rewrites is further accentuated in the *Trojan Women: A Love Story*. Despite her royal status, which is typical for the tragic heroes of Greek tragedy, Hecuba emphasises the vital role of the working class during her interaction with Talthybius; listing a wide variety of manual labour professions, such as "linen makers," "wheat growers," and "wall builders," she suggests that it is "these people who recreate and rearrange the material world" (*Trojan Women* 45), and that they do so

> not for such a simple, brutal purpose
> as wealth or power
> but for the more complex and interesting purpose
> of making a community
> to sustain human life. (*Trojan Women* 46)

This celebration of the working class, along with the very telling depiction of the two opposing classes in *Agamemnon 2.0*, is the most overt enunciation of the class consciousness of Mee's "Greek" plays. Yet, this perspective is reinforced by the binary of the dominant versus the dominated, which is pervasive throughout the plays. Whereas it might seem that the sufferers are always far from the country's borders, the effects of war on American citizens themselves are clearly implied, if not directly discussed: victims are not only sacrificed, but also conditioned into accepting what is decided for them, as in the case of Iphigenia; soldiers who partook in their country's imperialist ventures return mutilated, with war inscribed on their body as well as on their consciousness; few of them can even realise this, while most of them remain silenced and gagged like Tapemouth Man in *Orestes 2.0*; and, contrary to the state's omnipresent voice which seems to be the only one having access to public discourse, the citizens are ultimately like Trojan Andromache, who repeatedly "rushes down front and picks up a microphone, tries to speak. She cannot. Puts down the microphone and retreats upstage" (*Trojan Women* 6). Unlike Agamemnon, Menelaus, or finally Apollo, whose voice in *Orestes 2.0* "continues to be miked so that he can speak very quietly, in the manner and accent of the current American president" (*Orestes* 81), working class Americans are kept silenced like Andromache, and unable to control their own future, precisely like the "dead doll" (*Trojan Women* 19) that she holds in her hands.

Although Mee's rewrites do not feature an explicit resistance or a pronounced avant-garde role of the working class, they seem to forebode the radical reactions that the perpetuated violence and propaganda of the dominant class could produce. In *Iphigenia 2.0*, for instance, Agamemnon's contemplations predict his own fall:

> Because, we see from the histories of empires
> none will last forever
> and all are brought down finally
> not by others
> but by themselves (*Iphigenia* 2)

The end of the play reads exactly as the fall of his empire from within, as "bit by bit / the world descends into a big party riot murder war / the home and war fronts combined," finally finding Agamemnon wailing in agony (*Iphigenia* 67). The chaotic crescendo of the play, with soldiers and bridesmaids shattering champagne bottles on the walls, hurling wedding cake, and ripping off their clothes, signals the last days of Agamemnon's rule, and the refusal of the dominated to continue remaining voiceless and passive in this perpetuated cycle of oppression and imperialist violence. Agamemnon's empire, thus, precisely as it was foreboded at the beginning of the play, is about to fall not from the outside but from within, reminding the Marxian dictum that "violence is the midwife of every old society pregnant with a new one" (K. Marx 824). This interpretation—i.e. that the aforementioned riot is bringing down the old rule—is perhaps the only one that could allow catharsis to be achieved; otherwise, the ending reads as merely an aggressive breakout which perpetuates the already deeply rooted violence that the audience has witnessed throughout the play.

In a series of utterly uncathartic plays, it is finally the audience's potential response to Mee's onstage dilemma the only thing that could promise any hope for catharsis. The one end of this dilemma is characteristically exemplified—among many other instances of the five plays—by Menelaus's intervention in *Iphigenia 2.0*:

> Is it all a matter of distance, then?
> If you were an old man sitting at home by the fire
> you would tsk tsk the war
> even as you went out to dinner and the theatre
> you might even be appalled by it
> but not for more than a moment or two

> before you got on with deciding which wine to have with your fish. (11)

And for Mee it is precisely a matter of distance: all of his anti-war rewrites invite the spectators to assess their own role compared to the attitude of the old man described by Menelaus, and to opt for the other end of the dilemma, in the manner Apollo asks the onstage and the offstage audience to do in *Orestes 2.0*:

> Indeed, what you see written in the stars can as well be rewritten with a sense of what is right, with a sense of warmth and compassion.
> That's why I say to all of you here:
> watch.
> and learn. (*Orestes* 82)

Celebrating the social and political role of theatre, Mee's rewrites encourage their spectators to differentiate from the passivity and indifference depicted on stage, and to adopt a more active and critical stance concerning the current affairs of their country. The old man, who would condemn the war only for a time span of a few minutes, otherwise absorbed in the comfort of his personal routine, serves as a negative but at the same time familiar example; and it is precisely this familiarity that urgently calls for the audience's reflection and response. Accordingly, when the deus ex machina of *Orestes 2.0* suggests that whatever is written in the stars can be rewritten, he seems to address not the onstage characters but the spectators of the performance. Apollo's exhortation invites them to rewrite their own future, while Mee's own venture of rewriting tragedy is what they are encouraged to watch and learn from.

2.5 Concluding Remarks

As was demonstrated in this chapter, Mee's rewrites of Greek tragedy are deeply political and challenge a wide range of aspects related to contemporary American public life. Key elements of classical tragedy, such as the element of fate, are not merely adapted in order to fit in the modernised context of the rewrites, but rather form a vital part of the anti-war orientation of the plays, since they depict real-life arguments or attitudes that invite the intended audience's evaluation and reflection. At the same time, by weaving together the material of classical tragedies with modern fragments and references, the plays foster a critical approach of public

life beyond war itself. More specifically, Mee's revisiting of Euripides's *The Trojan Women* presents contemporary diplomacy not only as ineffective but also as an institution that undermines peace, whereas, distilled through Mee's pen, the main themes of *Orestes* demonstrate the failure of justice in the contemporary American framework. Furthermore, this chapter analysed how the mythic strand of the Trojan War, reworked through Mee's image-making, highlights the economic substratum of imperialist ventures, and contributes to the enunciation of the class consciousness that is pervasive in Mee's "Greek" plays. As the binary between the dominant versus the dominated class emerges through the plays, what is highlighted is the marginal role of contemporary citizens, who are urged by the plays to reclaim their role in the polis. This afterlife that the plays seek to have after the end of their performance—which is what perfectly summarises Mee's perception of the role of theatre—is the only way towards catharsis. Mee ultimately deploys tragedy to visualise American history and contemporary reality. His rewrites reduce the audience's distance from this reality, and challenge the perspective under which spectators see their own role, both in how history is written and in how history moves forward.

Notes

[1] McDonald also reads clear references to the William Kennedy Smith trial (*Orestes' Mania* 75), which shares a similar context to the Clarence Thomas case.

[2] Capitals in the original.

3. THE CONTRIBUTION OF CONTEMPORARY TEXTUAL FRAGMENTS AND ART FORMS TO MEE'S PUBLIC CRITIQUE

3.1 Introduction

The first two chapters of the present dissertation examined how Mee reworks Greek tragedy in order to castigate American imperialism and to raise questions about social and political matters in the contemporary US milieu. This chapter will explore the role of the rest of the elements that Mee interweaves with tragedy, both fictional and non-fictional, textual as well as audiovisual. Mee's particularly characteristic way of rewriting Greek tragedy is not confined to merely modernising the setting of the play or departing from specific aspects of the tragedies' plot to give prominence to contemporary preoccupations; what makes his rewriting unique is the way he inserts verbatim texts and artistic creations in the main body of his plays. Mee's Fatagaga-inspired collages incorporate fragments from particularly diverse sources, ranging from life coaching self-help manuals to warfare textbooks, and from nineteenth century poetry to contemporary video art and pop songs. As Savas Patsalidis suggests, "the particles that cram together to make up Mee's cultural and dramatic recombinations, retain their own form while participating in the active process that constitutes the work in its totality," and the result is a "new 'coherence' that Mee puts forward to replace the old one" (109). This coherence, however, cannot be achieved unless the spectators devise their own interpretations on how the elements connect with each other—equivocality is neither granted nor desired by Mee—and this is vital to further understand the political orientation of Mee's rewriting. The process is informed by Mee's belief that traditional playwriting is authoritarian, given the fact that spectators sit and wait for the playwright to organise their view of the universe, as well as his struggle towards a more democratic relationship between the audience and the playwright, who needs "to figure out a way for a person sitting alone in a room to come up with a structure that allows other people to take part in the making of the experience" (Mee and Solomon 73).

Cummings, moreover, suggests that Mee's postmodern, "quotational" technique that freely borrows all kinds of sources to create a wholly new context "challenges the strict, legalistic notion of intellectual property that has evolved over

the history of capitalism" and "incorporates a cacophony of voices and sensibilities into his plays, in a manner that does not smooth over their dissonance or resolve their differences" (5). The role of writing and theatre is therefore celebrated as "a violent collision of images, ideas, and values that propels societies" (Cummings 5). It is under this light that the present chapter examines the role of the various elements that supplement and inform Mee's rewrites of tragedy. My purpose is not to analyse every single of the borrowed pieces—this would be nearly impossible and also disorienting—but to focus on the elements that seem to most pronouncedly contribute to expressing the plays' anti-war and sociopolitical preoccupations. On the one hand, the present chapter will examine the contribution of a number of indicative non-fictional texts, namely the extracts of testimonies that recount the atrocities of war from the point of view of the perpetrators. More specifically, I explore how these fragments reproduce and resonate the familiar rhetoric about the necessity and justice of imperialist wars, and how, embedded as they are in the framework of the tragedy, they finally serve to undermine this rhetoric, thus contributing to the anti-war poetics of the plays. On the other hand, this chapter will attempt to "read" a variety of non-textual elements that are incorporated in Mee's rewrites; from songs and video art, to performing arts such as butoh dancing, these seemingly incongruous elements will be explored in the light of their contribution to the sociopolitical preoccupations of Mee's rewrites. In the same light, I aim at exploring how scenography and spatial parameters have also been deployed in performances of Mee's "Greek" plays, representing but also enriching and reinforcing strands of the playwright's work.

3.2 War Veteran Testimonies

Real-life testimonies are extensively used by Mee in all five plays discussed in the present dissertation. Despite their variety as regards the place where the incidents happened, what they all bring into the plays is a raw depiction of the horror of military enterprises from the perpetrator's point of view. Mee resorts again and again to a number of testimonies which are to a large extent recycled and reused throughout the five plays. I will here focus on two indicative extracts, which appear in two of the plays, *Iphigenia 2.0* and *Thyestes 2.0*. The first one recounts the assassination of

civilians and children, and as the great majority of the embedded testimonies, it happens far from any American territory:

> [T]here were four Palestinians in [the car] with RPGs
> and they killed three of my friends.
> So this new Peugeot comes towards us,
> and we shoot.
> And there was a family there—
> three children.
> And I cried,
> but I couldn't take the chance.
> Children, father, mother.
> All the family was killed,
> but we couldn't take the chance. (*Iphigenia* 10; *Thyestes* 14–15)

What is at stake within Mee's narrative is not the personal story and remorse—or lack thereof—of this particular soldier. Interestingly, in Dave Grossman's book about warfare and the psychological effects of killing, where we find the same story quoted verbatim, the incident is called a "gray-area killing," and belongs to the general trend of modern warfare which "in an age of guerillas and terrorists, [is] increasingly moving from black and white to shades of gray" (199). Similarly, in Gary D. Solis, who focuses on the legal and juridical aspect of the matter, we find the same story featuring among similar cases that took place in Somalia and Afghanistan. Solis's main point is to examine whether the incidents discussed would constitute a violation of laws and protocols about the protection of civilians (255–56). Ironically, though, the presence of US army forces in territories such as the Somalian and the Afghan is presented as a de facto justified one.

This extract comes to add its real-life, palpable force to the mythic and tragic strands of *Iphigenia 2.0* and *Thyestes 2.0*, blurring the boundaries between tragedy and reality. In *Iphigenia 2.0*, for instance, this extract is voiced by Menelaus in his attempt to bend Agamemnon's hesitation to sacrifice Iphigenia, and the real-life testimony serves as Menelaus's argument of what makes a good leader. From the mythical precedents of the Trojan War, and the question of the fairness of Iphigenia's forthcoming murder for the putative best interest of all Greeks, the audience is transported to the modern framework and the inevitability of war and war crimes for

the supposed common good of the US nation. The characters of Mee's plays, who are "wandering dispossessed about the devastated political and cultural landscape" serve as "mouthpieces of contemporary American culture" (Schlatter 7). The audience is therefore invited to evaluate this pervasive political and media rhetoric not only in the form of an analogy to the tragedy but also in the form of this striking juxtaposition.

The second quoted story that will be discussed here comes from a testimony of an Australian veteran of the Malaysian counterinsurgency during the so called Malayan Emergency.[1] No American forces were directly involved in it; in fact, simultaneously with the events in Malaysia, the American army was actively present in Korea, Puerto Rico, Lebanon and Vietnam, engaging in "classical imperial situation[s]" in order to gain control through the "seized wealth" of those places (Zinn 556). Irrespectively of the location, therefore, it is as if the story embedded in Mee's narrative resonates the same rhetoric that follows imperialist enterprises:

> When we cleaned out a terrorist prison camp
> we took a woman prisoner.
> I'd already told my men we took no prisoners,
> but I'd never killed a woman.
> "She has to die fast," my sergeant said.
> I was sweating.
> The woman said to me,
> what's the matter? you're sweating.
> "Not for you," I said, "It's a malaria recurrence."
> I gave my pistol to my sergeant,
> but he couldn't do it.
> None of them would do it,
> and I knew if I didn't do it,
> I'd never be able to control that unit again
> "You're sweating," she said again.
> "Not for you," I said.
> And I blew her fucking head off. (*Iphigenia* 10; *Thyestes* 15)

Partaking in both the extended metaphor of *Thyestes 2.0*, where the American onstage characters feed on imperial violence and on the justification of it, and in Menelaus's previously mentioned talk, this passage brings forward two very central strands of

American public discourse. On the one hand, as in any news report that the spectator could have come across recently, the enemy is "a terrorist," which is what conveniently justifies the necessary and fair nature of the military enterprise. On the other hand, the emotional distress experienced by the protagonist of this event reproduced by Mee, which yet results in the decision to kill nonetheless, accentuates the fact that what rises above human life is control over other people; whether this is control over another nation or one's own, like control over American soldiers or citizens, what is suggested by this kind of narrative is that taking a life is the cost that needs to be paid if this control is threatened. Juxtaposed with tragedy, these testimonies ultimately reject any abstraction, and bring the spectators before a twofold task: on the one hand, spectators are urged to face not a fictional representation but the raw facts of the crimes committed in their own name; on the other hand, the manner in which these testimonies resonate the rhetoric of the justification of imperialist violence invites the intended audience to assess the sincerity and rectitude of this justification.

3.3 Spatial Aspects and Scenography

A number of spatial and scenographic elements have their own significance in underscoring the social and political preoccupations that emerge through Mee's anti-war plays. The stage directions regarding the location of the plays are scarce, and it is only the mythic locations, such as Troy or Argos, that appear more discernibly in the texts. This vagueness has provided directors with an endless range of scenographic and spatial possibilities, and some directorial choices will be examined in the present chapter since they reinforce, I believe, the public debate Mee's rewrites can potentially raise. An aspect that certainly merits to be examined in the light of its contribution to the plays' preoccupations is the venture of En Garde Arts theatre company to stage Mee's works twice: the first attempt was in 1993 with *Orestes 2.0*, while a few years later, in 1996, the company performed Mee's *Trojan Women*—both plays directed by Tina Landau, who has been a close collaborator of Mee. En Garde Arts is a site-specific theatre company, which has been staging plays since 1985 in venues that range from the smallest to the largest public spaces in Manhattan. Patrice

Pavis's definition of a site-specific performance not only is of theoretical use here, but is also revealing as regards the added context the En Garde Arts productions offered to Mee's plays:

> This term refers to a staging and performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world (ergo, outside of established theatre). A large part of the work has to do with researching a place, often an unusual one, that is imbued with history or permeated with atmosphere: an airplane hangar, unused factory, city neighborhood, house or apartment. The insertion of a classical or modern text in this "found place" throws new light on it, gives it an unsuspected power, and places the audience at an entirely different relationship to the text, the place and the purpose for being there. This new context provides a new situation or enunciation and … gives the performance an unusual setting of great charm and power. (337–38)

Orestes 2.0 was held on a derelict naval pier by the Hudson River and *The Trojan Women* was produced in an abandoned amphitheatre in East River Park. These productions, thus, were not merely in accordance with the political orientation and public preoccupations of Mee's plays, but their space specificity also expanded the focus on the public sphere on a visual and semiotic level. Schlatter observes that apart from Mee's sharp collage of texts and audiovisual "bombardment," it was "the expansive outdoor sites in which these performances were staged that rendered them 'public', creating the sense that the entire society, the polis as a whole, was present in the space" (7). Underlining that both productions were staged at the edge of major waterways, Schlatter argues that the East and Hudson Rivers "make the history of the City present," since they are the channels through which New York accepted waves of immigrants from Europe, while allowing the city to be supplied with its needed resources. Simultaneously with the performance, the audience saw tug boats and barges "crawl silently up the Hudson in the dark, evoking memories of mass movements of raw materials, machinery, and humanity" (Schlatter 7). The performances, thus, "inscribe on their sites this sense of an encounter or meeting ground between present and past, living and dead" (Schlatter 5), and the history they conjure is both dead and alive; ultimately through this collective act of conjuring, the audience becomes a gathered public body which engages in a dialogue with itself, "provoking, hopefully, larger questions about the notion of progress, about the loss of

a shared history, and consequently, about the shared future of the assembled spectators" (Schlatter 3). The potential offered by the landscapes in site-specific performances is therefore fully aligned with the desired impact that Mee's rewrites aspire to have on their audiences; yet, any place in New York provides the perfect audiovisual canvas for Mee's anti-war plays. Campbell pertinently observes, for example, how in Landau's *Orestes 2.0* the city provided the perfect soundscape to enhance the play's atmosphere of chaos and war: the frequent sounds of sirens and helicopters, which are otherwise added in the play as recorded effects, amply offered themselves to the performance, while at the same time being part of the city's—and its residents'—life (77).

The role of space and scenography in indoor productions is equally interesting. Before the play's professional premiere (with En Garde Arts) in the spring of 1996, Tina Landau had already directed Mee's *Trojan Women* with the students of the School of Drama of the University of Washington. Her directorial conception enhanced the anti-war orientation of the play, and the utilisation of space—indoors in this case—is again worth examining. Sarah Bryant-Bertail's detailed analysis of the performance points out that Landau chose none of the available theatres but opted for two adjoining studios that were used for rehearsals and black-box productions. In their usual routine, the first one used to host from organised classes to informal meetings, featuring also a small canteen, while the second one was strictly used for acting classes, rehearsals or performances and remained locked the rest of the time. For the purposes of the performance, the first site represented shattered Troy and the second was transformed into the serene, luxurious spa of Act II. Landau made the play interact with the everyday life of the venue, and "every material object in the first site, no matter how random or mundane, was taken up by the actors and director in their collaborative building of a spatio-temporality" (Bryant-Bertail 42). At the same time, hundreds of shoes on the floor alluded to similar piles—of shoes, jewellery, glasses and other belongings—found in the Nazi concentration camps, "where the history of mass death was reduced to its starkest materiality" (Bryant-Bertail 42). The spectators were invited to participate in an ongoing construction of the set, which shockingly mixed together objects of everyday use with images from the darkest moments of human history. The production thus demonstrated that "theatre can shatter the 'matter' of history and construct a new historical site 'from scratch'"

(Bryant-Bertail 43). This process ultimately seems to follow Mee's own style of playwriting, which combines ancient fragments with shards of contemporary American public life in a manner that does not merely represent but also recreates history.

3.4 Other Arts

Asked by his daughter during an interview in 2002, Mee shares his views regarding both the content and the form of contemporary theatre in comparison to classical Greek drama. Content-wise, he suggests that contemporary drama has been reduced into a norm of plays which "shuts us down, shuts us up, blinds us, and deafens us with this sort of great muffled roar of reductionist psychology that eliminates history, eliminates politics. It eliminates the things that really all of us know" (E. Mee, *Shattered* 100). As regards the form on the other hand, Mee argues that contemporary performances have been stripped off the immense possibilities that can be incorporated in a play enriching and not undermining the genre (music, physical performance, but also mere noise and colour). Not only does Mee pronouncedly differentiate from the trend of writing unpolitical plays, but he also puts into practice his views on the added value that other arts can bring into theatre. The plays discussed in the present dissertation incorporate a variety of art forms, which, as will be argued here, are deployed in order to highlight the anti-war and sociopolitical preoccupations of Mee's rewrites.

3.4.1 Music and Songs

Prominent among all the arts that accompany tragedy in Mee's plays is the role of music and songs. Classical music is deployed to underscore dramatic action, while operatic pieces from Berlioz's *Les Troyens*—which is the second pillar that informs Mee's rewrite of *The Trojan Women*—create a striking contrast against the shocking reenacted or recounted violence of the plays. Deploying music in this manner is, of course, a common practice in the theatre and the cinema, and rarely does a performance lack music accompaniment. Yet, it is equally rare to find extensive

suggestions of particular songs provided by playwrights themselves within the body of their texts. The majority of Mee's rewrites, however, include a vast amount of songs whose lyrics are inserted verbatim in the plays.[2] Either played in the background of the performances or in many cases sung by the characters of the plays, the lyrics of the songs feature at times a conceptual continuity with the onstage action, but more often than not, they "inject further moral horror" into the scenes (Schlatter 7). As Schlatter observes, "[a]n unbearably insipid song such as the Carpenters' 'I Really Do' was lent a startling and desperate poignancy when sung by Electra to her mad brother," and especially the great number of pop songs in the plays "serve a Brechtian function of illuminating and commenting ironically on the stage action" (7). Indicative is also the insertion of Tom Waits and Crystal Gayle's song "Is There Any Way out of This Dream?" in *Thyestes 2.0*. Sung by the narrator of the play exactly after her recounting of the cycle of violence that runs through the five generations of the myth, the song ironically fills the space with an ambience of dreaminess. Within the extended metaphor of the play, however, the lyrics also seem to acquire new meanings, since the repeatedly expressed desire to find a way out of the dream could be seen as the need of the banqueter characters to free themselves from consuming the justification of imperial violence. These examples are indicative, I believe, of the numerous occasions in which Mee deploys music and songs not as background elements, but as ones that actively contribute to the narrative and the sociopolitical preoccupations of his plays.

3.4.2 Butoh

Among all the arts that appear in Mee's texts and/or performances, and contribute to the articulation of his anti-war and sociopolitical preoccupations, the reference to butoh dancing seems strikingly interesting. In *Agamemnon 2.0* when Clytemnestra enters for the first time, she appears "white as a Butoh dancer" (9), while in the first scenes of *Thyestes 2.0*, a very tall man "with some bizarre Butoh-like inability to walk normally / comes in naked and caked with charcoal and blood" (9). The two texts do not explicitly call for an extended use of butoh on stage, yet they seem to introduce a prompt for directors who may wish to experiment with this idea, either on a merely stylistic level—that is with an actor or actress that imitates the

physical appearance of a butoh dancer—or perhaps with a brief dancing session on stage. Even the slightest assimilation of butoh in the performances could be seen as particularly relevant to Mee's anti-war rewrites, amplifying the atmosphere of suffering and imperialist destruction. "Imagine bodies hairless and pure white, except for black, deeply set eyes. Emaciated and weightless, they glide across a dark space as if on no legs. They join other such bodies, whose faces register the contact through hideously distorted grins or silent shrieks" (Bruhm 25). Steven Bruhm's introductory description of what a butoh performance looks like is telling, I believe, of how fitting this dance could be to visualise the horror of war on stage. Yet, the historical and cultural background of butoh seems deeply relevant as well.

Influenced by German expressionism and Antonin Artaud's "theater of cruelty," while at the same time deeply rooted in Japanese cultural history (Orlando 311), butoh was born in 1959 to reject both "the ideological infiltrations of the West" and "the ossified stage practices of bourgeois Japanese theatre, such as kabuki and noh" (Bruhm 28). Rising in the aftermath of World War II and the horror of the atomic blasts in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, butoh consists of a series of poses and choreographic gestures that are meant to physically depict suffering and trauma, poverty and dehumanisation. The *ganimata*, for instance, one of the most legible body postures of butoh dancers "condenses in the dancer a number of ravaged bodies: the rice picker in the paddy, the survivor of an atomic blast, the malnourished and maimed" (Bruhm 28). Especially the relationship of butoh with the atomic blasts in Japan, make the dance also relevant to Mee's rewrite of *The Trojan Women*, where the playwright has incorporated testimonies of Hiroshima survivors. As a matter of fact, in the performance of *Trojan Women: A Love Story* by Drake University Theatre of Iowa, directed by Mirla Criste in 2018, the cast was guided through exploring the trauma of the Trojan Women by delving into butoh techniques during rehearsals but also with butoh elements embedded in the play. Whether looking into the traces of this dance in Mee's plays in a physical and performative perspective or approaching it from a historical point of view, butoh is a component that can partake constructively and thought-provokingly in the anti-war narrative of Mee's rewrites, reinforcing and supplementing them with what language may fail to convey.

3.4.3 Video Art

Screens and projections are frequently part of the set in Mee's "Greek" plays, since they are put on stage to represent current media discourse, or just to depict a bombardment of fragmented information. However, *Thyestes 2.0* also features a more targeted use of video, by introducing video art in the play as a distinctive form and means of creative expression. Thus, apart from "a dozen random youtube videos" projected "on five screens that descend from the flies to different heights" (25)—the fact that this movement alludes to the *deus ex machina* of classical tragedy while the videos present blunders of cats, children and B movie heroes seems strikingly ironic—the play has incorporated two video art creations which, as will be argued here, come to add their creative force to Mee's textual and visual collage. One of them, which will be indicatively examined here, is called *My Love is an Anchor* and was created by video artist Kate Gilmore in 2004. During the seven minutes of the video we see the artist trying to free her left leg out of a bucket with dry concrete, and even though she manages to overcome the physical pain and endurance demanded to succeed, the video ends with her leg still in the bucket. As a separate artwork the video belongs to the feminist agenda raised by Gilmore, whose video art pieces "re-imagine female agency in the post-modern world," and in which the lone protagonist struggles to overcome a series of self-imposed obstacles (Weil 6). Yet, within the series of the physical acting fragments of *Thyestes 2.0* that precede Gilmore's video art, the latter could potentially acquire new meanings. Following acted snapshots in which "a grown man is wheeled out in a baby carriage / and dumped out onto the ground" over and over again, or others of men and women who throw each other against the wall along with discordant music played at a deafening volume (24), Gilmore's video art could be "read" as visualising the struggle of the onstage and offstage individuals to escape the destructive but deeply rooted cycle of American imperialist invasions. Particularly in the framework of the play's extended metaphor of the banqueters who consume and feed on the necessity and justice of imperialist violence, the video art could also read as a personal or collective *agon* to set free from this specific rhetoric. Mee's collage technique certainly allows and requires each spectator to proceed to deciphering how all the different elements become coherent, however the interpretation I propose seems to tie in with the political and anti-war layers of *Thyestes 2.0* and the five "Greek" plays discussed in my dissertation.

3.5 Concluding Remarks

As was designated in the present chapter, Mee's rewrites of Greek tragedy brim with numerous additions of contemporary textual fragments but also with a variety of art forms, which are creatively incorporated in the body of the plays. What was contended is that the various elements that are deployed by the playwright, incongruous though they may seem, ultimately contribute to the plays' anti-war and sociopolitical preoccupations. On a textual level, the testimonies of war veterans, which are inserted verbatim in the plays, do not only recount the atrocities of war but also invite the audience to identify—and critically reflect upon—the familiar rhetoric around the necessity and justice of imperialist wars. On a non-textual level, the present chapter analysed several elements that Mee himself has inserted in his rewrites but also certain creative contributions of theatre practitioners who engaged in staging Mee's plays. A number of directorial and scenographic choices, for instance, appear to reinforce and expand the political orientation of Mee's plays, especially in the site-specific performances of Mee's rewrites, which most pronouncedly establish a dialogue between the plays and the polis. Finally, the numerous art forms embedded in the plays do not serve as background elements; as was demonstrated in this chapter, music, video art, and especially butoh dancing, with all its artistic and historical weight, are elements that accentuate the plays' anti-war and political preoccupations, and thus constitute a vital part of Mee's (re)creations.

Notes

[1] The Malayan Emergency lasted from 1948 to 1960 and was part of the decolonisation of Asia.

[2] Referring to *The Trojan Women: A Love Story*, Mee says: "There are too many songs in this piece. I loved them all so much I couldn't cut any, but there are too many. Also, a director and actors may want to bring in other songs that they feel capture the essence of the piece. Feel free to do it" (*Trojan Women* 125).

CONCLUSION

Mee's significant contribution to the practice of rewriting Greek tragedy does not solely pertain to the large number of plays he has adapted, but most importantly to the orientation and the unique style of his rewrites. While the playwright follows closely the structure of the parent-texts as well as certain central conventions of tragedy, his rendition of the plays is radical. This to a large extent involves Mee's particular manner of recreating the plays by incorporating in them a variety of contemporary textual extracts and non-textual elements. Yet, Mee's rewrites are also radical in the sense that the critique they raise is deeply political. My research and analysis of the plays designated how Mee resorts to Greek tragedy in order to formulate a multileveled critique against contemporary imperial politics and in order to challenge a wide range of aspects related to contemporary American reality. His dramatic recombinations put forward highly topical questions regarding the devastating effects of contemporary American imperialist ventures, and challenge the perspective under which spectators see their own role in the contemporary polis.

Although Mee's "Greek" plays have been popular with theatre practitioners and audiences alike, only a few of these plays have so far incited extensive critical attention. Especially the five plays discussed in my dissertation have been scarcely examined by critics, with the exception of *Thyestes 2.0*, which lacks any prior critical approaches. My research therefore aspires to expand the focus of the critical examination of these particular works. More specifically, however, the originality of the present dissertation lies in the fact that it highlights the underlying thematic connection of this body of works. Although *Orestes 2.0*, *Agamemnon 2.0*, *Trojan Women: A Love Story*, *Iphigenia 2.0*, and *Thyestes 2.0* were written by Mee within a time span of over twenty years, all of them brim with questions pertaining to contemporary imperialism. Examining the five plays through this common lens is fruitful, I believe, to understand Mee's anti-war polemics, without undermining the exploration of each play's particular focus. What finally emerges through this examination is that Mee's unique way of rewriting classical Greek tragedy formulates a piercing anti-war critique, which urgently asks for the audience's reflection and reaction. Mee ultimately deploys tragedy to visualise American history and contemporary reality, and celebrates the role of theatre as a space which fosters critical reflection and intervenes in the public discourse and debate.

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Στο πλαίσιο της μακρόχρονης παράδοσης των μετεγγραφών της αρχαίας ελληνικής τραγωδίας και της σύγχρονης εννοιολογικής αναπλαισίωσής της για το αμερικανικό κοινό του εικοστού και του εικοστού πρώτου αιώνα, σημαντική είναι η συμβολή του πολυγραφότατου θεατρικού συγγραφέα Charles Mee. Ανάμεσα στις πολυάριθμες μετεγγραφές του Mee, που αποτελούν τις δικές του εκδοχές των αρχαίων έργων με τα οποία καταπιάστηκε, τα πέντε έργα που αναλύονται στη διπλωματική μου εργασία παρουσιάζουν μία σαφή θεματική σύγκλιση, καθώς όλα ασχολούνται με τους ιμπεριαλιστικούς πολέμους και τις στρατιωτικές επεμβάσεις των ΗΠΑ κατά τον εικοστό αιώνα. Εμπνευσμένα σε μεγάλο βαθμό από τις πτυχές της τραγωδίας και του μύθου που αφορούν στον Τρωικό Πόλεμο, τα έργα *Orestes 2.0* (1992), *Agamemnon 2.0* (1994), *Trojan Women: A Love Story* (1994), *Iphigenia 2.0* (2007), και *Thyestes 2.0* (2015) θέτουν ζητήματα γύρω από τις καταστροφικές συνέπειες της ιμπεριαλιστικής πολιτικής, και εγείρουν μία πολυδιάστατη κριτική της σύγχρονης αμερικανικής δημόσιας ζωής. Η διπλωματική μου εργασία έχει στόχο να εξερευνήσει πώς η αρχαία ελληνική τραγωδία, επεξεργασμένη μέσα από την πένα του Mee, λειτουργεί ως ένα καλλιτεχνικό ερέθισμα που προσκαλεί τους θεατές να επαναξιολογήσουν τη σύγχρονη αμερικανική ιστορία. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, η εργασία μου αναλύει πώς οι συγκλίσεις και οι αποκλίσεις σε σχέση με τα αρχαία έργα διαμορφώνουν τα έργα του Mee, και μελετά το ρόλο των σύγχρονων στοιχείων και διακειμενικών αναφορών που εισάγονται στα έργα (μαρτυρίες στρατιωτικών, στοιχεία της ποπ κουλτούρας, έργα video art κ.ά.). Αναλύοντας το ψηφιδωτό της συνύπαρξης αρχαίων και σύγχρονων αποσπασμάτων, η παρούσα διπλωματική εργασία ερευνά πώς όλα αυτά τα στοιχεία τίθενται στην υπηρεσία του συγγραφέα για να συνθέσουν τον αντιπολεμικό χαρακτήρα των δημιουργιών του, και πώς η κριτική που εγείρουν τα έργα του Mee είναι επίκαιρη και σχετική με τη σύγχρονη αμερικανική πραγματικότητα.