

A Provocation

Women & War: Do the Ancient Greek Archetypes Offer 21st Century Insight for Women?

BY PEGGY SHANNON

In just a moment, I will make three statements designed to provoke ire, arouse curiosity, and encourage further analysis.

But first, a disclaimer: I do not necessarily agree with all of these statements.

A brief overview to provide context and then, my three statements.

Written during a century when there were many long years of war, the ancient Greek plays often addressed the ravages of war. Many of these plays featured female characters. By choosing to emphasize women as wives, mothers, and prisoners of war, the ancient Greeks placed a female face on the currency and the collateral damage of war. These ancient tragedies functioned to educate the masses by offering reflections of civic fears, concerns, prejudices, commonly held beliefs, and through them, to ask questions of civic identity, which would inform political discourse. The devastation of war infected every strata of society, for every person, male and female, experienced war personally through combat, loss, rape, enslavement, victory and increased or diminished power. By serving as, what Zeitlin calls ‘emotional surrogates’,¹ the gendered constructions of:

¹ Zeitlin, Froma I. *Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus’ Seven Against Thebes*. Roma: Edizioni Dell Ateneo, 1982.

Zeitlin, Froma I. ‘The Motif of Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus *Oresteia*’. *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association* 96 (1965): 463-508.

Zeitlin, Froma I. ‘Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama.’ *Representations* 11 (1985): 63-94. Revised in *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Civilization*. Chicago, 1996. 341-74.

- Atossa (in the Persians - Aeschylus),
- Hecuba (in the Trojan Women - Euripides),
- Antigone (in Antigone - Sophocles),
- Clytemnestra (in the Oresteia - Aeschylus),
- Helen (in both The Trojan Women and in Helen - Euripides),
- Iphigenia (particularly in Iphigenia at Aulis - Euripides),
- Lysistrata (in Lysistrata - Aristophanes)

may have been a device for exploring war-related anxieties of:

- loss (Atossa, Clytemnestra),
- of sacrifice (Iphigenia, Hecuba),
- of loyalty to the dead and to family (Antigone),
- of sexual desire during war (Helen and Lysistrata),
- of revenge (Hecuba and Clytemnestra)
- and of the resolution of war through peace (Lysistrata).

In the 21st century, women are equally affected by war, now as combatants, and still as mothers, wives, prisoners of war, and victims of rape. They are looking for answers, they are asking to be seen, heard, and understood. They themselves are seeking role models to help navigate their way through war.

So... Do the Ancient Greek Archetypes Offer 21st Century Insight for Women?

STATEMENT #1

Women in the 21st century have no business returning to the ancient Greek plays to seek insight or to access male-constructed female archetypes of women in war. Women were virtually invisible in society throughout the 5th century BCE. Aristotle was an over-the-top misogynistic writer who minimized the female to the point of erasure.

ON THE ONE HAND...

we have feminist scholar Sue-Ellen Case who suggests that ancient Greek art and literature should basically be dismissed altogether. She argues that the tragic plays are misogynistic and defends her position by quoting Aristotle's *Poetics* in which he suggests that women 'are inferior and should not be depicted as brave or intellectually clever in

Who Do We Think We Are?: Representing the Human postgraduate symposium at the Centre for Creative Collaboration, Kings Cross, London. 19 March 2011.

plays.’² Case asserts that women have no business acting in, producing, perhaps even studying ancient Greek plays since they were written by men, performed by men, and intended to be viewed by men, and thus subject to erasure of anything femalecentric.³

ON THE OTHER HAND...

we have scholars Marianne McDonald and David Wiles who suggest that antiquity does hold considerable value for everyone, including women. Wiles argues that ‘the exclusion of women and non-Athenian males from the category of ‘the people’ should not blind us to the nature of the achievement’ (48)⁴ of democracy under Pericles, while McDonald posits that modern women can and do utilize the ancient Greek characters to explore issues of war, motherhood, political sacrifice, and lament.⁵ And while Aristotle may have seen women as inferior, Edith Hall points out that the ancient Greeks and Romans were, in fact, quite interested in women. She reminds us that ‘in the second century AD, the satirist Lucian remarked that there (were) more females than males ‘in these plays...’

STATEMENT #2

The female archetypes found within the war-themed tragedies pose an intriguing possibility – indeed an under-researched potential – for the promotion of healing war-related moral and psychological trauma such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

ON THE ONE HAND...

There are those, such as Dr. Judith W. Taylor, a neuropsychologist at the Washington D.C. Veterans Medical Center, who see the use of ancient Greek plays as an adjunct to traditional therapeutic services as ‘bogus and destructive.’

² Case, Sue-Ellen. ‘Classic Drag: The Greek Creation of Female Parts’. *Theatre Journal* 37. 3 (October 1985): 317-27.

³ Worth noting is that many contemporary female directors are indeed faced with reconciling the numerous female parts offered in the ancient Greek plays with the understanding that within their historical performance context, these roles were portrayed by men. Sometimes it was parody, as seen in the Satyr plays, and sometimes it was the male portraying the female ideal – the ideal that an Athenian woman could never achieve.

⁴ Wiles, David. *Greek Theatre Performance: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). See also Marianne McDonald’s *The Living Art of Greek Tragedy*. Indiana University Press, 2003.

⁵ This point of view can be found in McDonald’s book, *Ancient Sun, Modern Light: Greek Drama on the Modern Stage*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

WHILE ON THE OTHER HAND...

There are those who believe, such as Dr. Candace Monson and Dr. Jonathan Shay, that the battle-themed ancient Greek plays can be used to address complex and pressing issues pertaining to gender and war and perhaps even result in:

- Enriched public discourse on the topic of women and war; and
- Improved public policies for support of female veterans.

And finally, STATEMENT #3:

The record number of female-translated and -directed theatre productions of the ancient Greek plays stems from an artistic impulse to use performance as a critical model for understanding cultural and social actions as they pertain to gender and war.

ON THE ONE HAND...

we have British stage director Annie Castledine, who states that she is ‘certainly not using the Greeks to respond to war’ but is ‘focused on using the Greek plays to discuss women’s sexual passion,’ and American director Mary Kay Gammel, whose primary artistic investigation appears focused on how to best recreate the effect of ancient performance.

WHILE ON THE OTHER HAND...

playwrights such as Velina Hasu Houston and Ellen McLaughlin, are openly investigating ethical issues of women and war by turning to the Greeks for inspiration. Others, such as South African playwright/director Yael Farber, articulate a belief that political and war-related themes ‘are present in any area of conflict in the world – and so beautifully articulated by the Greek Classics.’⁶ Translators such as Harue Yamagata believe the ancient plays can serve as analogues for contemporary war. Dramaturgs such as Martina Treu are providing directors, playwrights and translators with the necessary historical research and contemporary theory to guide interpretations of the ancient plays. Globally, female directors such as Erin Mee, Carey Perloff, Lydia Koniordou, Wendy Knox, Katie Mitchell, Rina Yerushalmi, Corinna Seeds, Elizabeth Huffman, Sara Farouk,

⁶ Otas, Belinda interview with Yael Farber in *The New Black Magazine*. April 2008.

Who Do We Think We Are?: Representing the Human postgraduate symposium at the Centre for Creative Collaboration, Kings Cross, London. 19 March 2011.

appear to be (re)turning to the ancient Greek plays in order to investigate the condition of women's lives in relation to familial, domestic, national, and international wars in the 20th and 21st centuries.

In conclusion, the challenge of examining moral and ethical issues pertaining to war and the role of women in war confronts social scientists, theatre scholars, practitioners, classicists and, in some instances, policymakers in communities locally and globally.

Is it possible that by mobilizing research to bring available knowledge in gender studies, women's engagement with war and theatre productions of the ancient Greek war-themed plays there may be an increase in global communication across cultural boundaries regarding the role of women in war in the 21st century? I would like to think so.