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### Reloading the Canon: Ariane Mnouchkine’s Les Atrides

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Disons en un mot que les classiques me semblent bien plus une invitation à réfléchir sur l’histoire que des illustrations d’une esthétique transcendantale.¹

The quotation provided in exegesis opens up a discussion about classics that I wish to pursue here in relation to theatre. Although critic Bernard Dort once wrote that “jouer les classiques […] ne va pas de soi”,² the number of productions of works by the likes of Shakespeare or Molière each season in France suggests that directors and audiences alike relish the opportunity to engage with such material. However, the staging of canonical works involves a difficult balancing act since it requires presenting them as both “transcendent and time-bound”.³ In other words, it is necessary to show that despite being shaped by the thinking of a particular time period and place, the texts address concerns relevant to contemporary audiences. In effect, this means underlining how the works have reached us through centuries of interpretation. As Daniel Mesguich explains, when staging a classic, a director in effect has to deal with both a visible and an invisible text:

Mettre en scène un texte classique, c’est non seulement mettre en scène un texte *visible*, bien sûr (le texte littéral, imprimé), mais aussi d’une certaine manière – et à la différence des textes contemporains – mettre en scène un second texte, *invisible*, composé de la mémoire du texte visible, de son histoire, de sa poussière (gloses, commentaires, exégèses, mises en scène, voire effets des intimidations successives par lui apportées, etc.).⁴

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Playing up Contradictions in the Dramaturgy

Readers familiar with Aeschylus’s trilogy The Oresteia (458 BCE) will know that the opening play, Agamemnon, dramatizes the triumphant return of the eponymous general after the Trojan war and his subsequent murder at the hands of his wife. However by opening Les Atrides with Euripides’s Iphigénie à Aulis (406 BCE), Mouchkine provided the back-story and posited the sacrifice of virgin daughter Iphigenia as the founding act that provoked the cycle of retributive murders in the Atreus family. Moreover, by virtue of this addition, Mouchkine brought into focus how the myth comprises different versions of the story. Indeed, in the course of the cycle, two contradictory descriptions of the sacrifice are provided.

The first description, given by a messenger at the end of Iphigénie à Aulis, argues that the act was not only desired by the gods, but also carried out in accordance with ceremonial rites. To underline the legitimacy of the sacrifice, the messenger quotes the priest’s address to the gods textually: “Accueille le sang immaculé d’un beau cou de vierge, Accorde à notre flotte une traversée sans encombres, Et à nous, de prendre le château de Troie, à la guerre” (ll. 1574-76). He also emphasises that the victim was consenting, this time by quoting Iphigenia: “Et mon corps, pour ma terre paternelle, Et pour la Grèce toute entière, Je vous l’offre” (ll. 1533-35). He then reveals how, miraculously, the goddess for whom the sacrifice was intended, substituted Iphigenia in extremis with a heifer: “elle ne veut pas souiller son autel d’un sang de bonne race” (l. 1595). However, as Nicole Loraux has explained, despite the messenger’s insistence on interpreting the substitution as a tiding of joy, the fact that the maiden is replaced by an animal not normally sacrificed in ancient Greece, somewhat undermines his claims that all is in order.12

8 Her inclusion in such surveys of theatre practice as Shomitt Mitter and Maria Shvetsova’s Fifty Key Theatre Directors (London and New York: Routledge, 2005) confirms this.
10 Regarding the translations used in production, Mouchkine relied on Jean and Mayotte Bollack’s translation Iphigénie à Aulis (Paris: Minuit, 1990). However she herself translated the opening two plays of the Oresteia: Agamemnon (Paris: Éditions théâtrales, 1992) and Les Choéphores (Paris: Éditions théâtrales, 1992), while regular Théâtre du Soleil collaborator Hélène Cixous provided Les Éuménides (Paris: Éditions théâtrales, 1992). Quotations from the plays will therefore use these translations. In keeping with convention, line numbers and not page numbers will be provided.
Such a sense of unease about the validity of the act is taken to a whole new level in the second description, which paints a very different picture of the event. The chorus at the start of Agamemnon tells “a much more brutal tale than we have heard in Euripides”. Indeed, the old men reveal that orders were given to seize Iphigenia “comme une chèvre au-dessus de l’autel!” (ll. 231-232), but that she resisted: “de toutes ses forces elle s’accroche à la terre” (l. 234). As a result, her father asked for her to be silenced, else she might curse his name: “Et qu’on étouffe sur les lèvres de sa belle bouche / Les cris qui sinon maudiraient la maison” (ll. 236-237). In comparison with the messenger’s account, the chorus’s testimony places greater emphasis on the visual and thus seems all the more believable. The old men were present at the scene but refuse to comment on events they did not directly witness: “La suite, je ne l’ai pas vue et je ne la dirai pas” (l. 248).

Of course, the chorus is remembering the event ten years after its occurrence, however in comparison, the messenger’s account, which was delivered to reassure the on-stage audience made-up of the grieving mother and a chorus of maidens, appears fabricated.

On a meta-theatrical level, by bringing together two versions of a same myth, Mnouchkine revealed how both form part of our heritage. Iphigenia both dies and is saved as her sacrifice is “re-membered” by the tellers of stories in these two founding works of the European stage. On a diegetic level, Iphigenia’s father Agamemnon appears all the more shifty and I concur with Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s reading of the Oresteia that he is revealed to be guileless but guilty of ambition:

On sait désormais ce que fut réellement le sacrifice d’Iphigénie: moins l’obéissance aux ordres d’Artémis, moins le dur devoir d’un roi qui ne veut pas commettre de faute à l’égard de ses alliés, que la coupable faiblesse d’un ambitieux dont la passion conspirant avec la divine Triché, s’est résolu à immoler sa propre fille.  

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However, it seems to me that both the above critics were somewhat bewildered by the experience and missed the key point, that a wedge was being driven between actor and character. In many Western playhouses, audiences are expected to suspend their disbelief and view the actors as embodiments of their character, yet this is impossible in the Cartoucherie where the actors are seen preparing. As a result, the character is held at a distance from the actor. The mystique of metamorphosis that Brecht railed against in Western acting cannot take place. Rather David Williams's analysis of the rift that occurs between actor and character in Peter Brook's work, which provides the actor "with the objectivity, lucidity and compassion of a narratorial commentator or puppeteer" is appropriate to describe what happens in Mnouchkine's practice too.

Moreover, driving a wedge between actor and character was part of an overall attempt to drive a wedge between the audience and the fable. The omnipresence of Mnouchkine prior to the performance, from checking the audience's tickets, to serving food and directing people where to sit, showed how the director was positioned in the space between the fable and the audience. As Sallie Goetsch notes: "If Mnouchkine's engagement with Aeschylus and Euripides was mediated by translations, our experience of Les Atrides was even more carefully and explicitly mediated by Ariane Mnouchkine." However, the most ingenious means of opening up a space between the audience and the story in Les Atrides was an installation. En route from the reception hall to the performance space, the audience passed next to what appeared to be archaeological digs. Trenches were filled with life-sized statues of people and horses lined up in rows, which bore a resemblance to the warriors of the Chinese terracotta army, but also to the costumed actors. As the chorus entered at the start of Agamemnon, it seemed as if "the crowd of statues had returned to life and found their way to the stage."

The trenches allowed the audiences to participate in, or at least view, the excavation of the texts, digging them up from the past. They served as a metaphor for the excavation work that Mnouchkine had undertaken in order to translate the works in the first place. Instead of churning out pots and vases with depictions of scenes from the Orsteias as one might expect, the digs playfully underlined how ancient Greek society was as removed from us as Emperor Quin's mausoleum. Indeed though references to non-Western traditions might be taken as indicators of the universal scope of the myth, they mainly highlighted distance for European audiences between the material and themselves.

Mixing Cultures as a Distancing Device

Such distancing effects created in pre-performance by allaying different cultural references were also explored in the mise en scène. For instance, rather than figuratively representing a tableau of ancient Greece, the set referred back to combat sports anchored in Roman and Spanish cultures. Ochre walls enclosed a large space that resembled an arena not unlike that of the Coliseum. Or to quote Guy Dumur: "le plateau, éclairé pleins feux, est entouré d'un mur décupé, percé d'ouvertures comme dans les plazas de torones." The critic for Libération, René Solis, provides a remarkably similar description: "des arènes, l'espace a gardé non la forme mais la couleur ocre et le mur d'enceinte avec, à des intervalles réguliers, de ces abris où se glisser pour échapper à la bête," as does Robin Thorner in the Guardian, who labels the space a "bare timber bear-pit or bullring." The dramatic intensity of the space described is striking and fate takes on the role of the bull, which the protagonists stand up to, while the chorus darts

25 It is also tempting to read the archaeological digs as an ironic allusion to Barthes's indication, "c'est donc en donnant à l'œuvre son exacte figure, je ne dis pas archéologique, mais historique, que nous manifesterons le lien qui nous unit à cette œuvre." Roland Barthes, "Comment representer l'Antique?" in Théâtre Aujourd'hui, 1 (2007 [1972]), pp. 74-82, (p. 76).
26 Commenting on working with Mnouchkine, Pierre Juteau de la Combe explained that "Mnouchkine chose to associate scholarship with her project intimately, so that her findings in the working of the translation and in the staging of the plays could always be related to precise and argued decisions concerning the meaning and the syntax of the words" in Pierre Juteau de la Combe, "Ariane Mnouchkine and the History of the French Agamemnon" in Fiona Macintosh, Pantellis Michalakis, Edith Hall and Oliver Taplin (eds), Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 273-290, (p. 275).
behind to hide. Although the space may have had little in common with traditional representations of Ancient Greece, it appealed to what Mnouchkine defines as the permeability of the audience. In other words, audience members could read into the agonistic space their own political interpretations. Thornber, for instance, was drawn to see via the arena images of “a bloodied village square that could be anywhere from Bosnia to Iraq”.

Mnouchkine’s mixing of Roman and Spanish references may not have received much negative comment, but her forays into the visual languages of Asian performance traditions have often been criticised. When in the 1980s her productions started to reveal an interest in non-Western traditions, a number of critics took this to be an indicator of a decline in the Théâtre du Soleil’s political activities. Gautam Dasgupta saw this as part of a global trend: “as political enthusiasm waned worldwide in the late seventies, the Théâtre du Soleil’s productions came to be seen and appreciated largely for their prodigious aesthetic experimentations”. Brian Singleton, who attended Mnouchkine’s cycle of Shakespearean dramas, *Les Shakespeare* (1982-1984), believed that the audience on exiting the theatre “leaves behind the feudal power struggles of Shakespeare, the Asian primary source cultures and the interculturalist theatre forms, pigeon-holing this as a purely aesthetic experience”.

Singleton’s comments about Mnouchkine’s earlier production cycle may be applied to *Les Atrides*, yet my own reading of her use of non-European performance traditions is rather different. I follow John Rockwell, who in his review of *Les Atrides* for the *New York Times*, suggested that Mnouchkine conducts her experiments from the perspective of a “lifelong Parisian” who “has created a unique style that blends world theatrical cultures in the service of Western classics and contemporary epics”.

In other words, Mnouchkine’s work needs to be viewed through the prism of the

French cultural scene and her use of motifs, patterns and signs borrowed ostensibly from the East opens up spaces for critical reflection precisely because they are other. Or as Eugenio Barba explains in the preface to his *Dictionnaire de l’anthropologie théâtrale*, “A travers la confrontation avec ce qui nous paraît étranger, nous éduquons notre regard et lui apprenons à la fois participation et distanciation”. This is indeed the analysis that Bryant-Bertall provides of Ariane Mnouchkine’s work, describing her use of intercultural references as a “commitment to a historically responsible theatre [which] has taken her along a Brechtian route through a Verfremdung achieved by borrowing from Asian theatre”.

Costume in *Les Atrides*, for instance, implicated the heroes in a world of brutality in which murder was performed almost ritualistically. Thus in *The Libation Bearers*, the women of the chorus were dressed all in black with a red cummerbund, golden jewellery and headgear, their faces painted white in similar fashion to Kabuki actors, whilst heavy black eye liner brought out startled looks in their eyes. Some also had tears of red painted on their faces and wore very bright red lipstick, which drew attention to their mouths as conveyors of bloody news. The heightened expressiveness of the choral bodies saw them “whirling and chanting like Javanese dancers at some tribal feast, they become enthusiastic celebrants of Orestes’ blood-sacrifice while lamenting the necessity of such an ‘action sauvage’”. Or, as Judith Miller puts it, “the shaking, convulsing bodies of the chorus transmitted to the public the emotional impact of the play’s horrific actions: infanticide (*Iphigenia*), parricide (*Agamemnon*), matricide (*The Libation Bearers*), vengeance (*The Eumenides*)”.

As the previous descriptions attest, it would be wrong to claim that Mnouchkine attempted to replicate a particular Eastern tradition. Although for Eileen Blumenthal she “crossbreeds the Greek scripts with south Indian Kathakali dance drama”, I would suggest that this form was rather the starting point for creating

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30 Mnouchkine qtd in Solis op. cit., p. 36.
31 Thober, op. cit., loc. cit.
36 Bryant-Bertall, op. cit., p. 174.
her own theatrical language. Mnouchkine's own remark, "the more I am Balinese, Javanese or Indian, the more Greek I am", reveals precisely such an intention of creating an intercultural language that mixes several traditions together. In this regard, Bernard Dort's description of her work as a "collage extrême-oriental" is appropriate. The actors were encouraged to favor a hybrid style of performance borrowed from different sources. Such an approach is not without dangers and has not escaped violent criticism. Marvin Carlson, for one, has warned against Mnouchkine's "dangerous and self-deceptive vision" that theatre texts, techniques and aesthetics can be appropriated or assimilated to create a new hybrid form of theatre. John Russell-Brown has also heavily criticized Mnouchkine, linking her practice with that of another director interested in intercultural exchanges and working in France, Peter Brook:

Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook are the most accomplished among the many theatre directors who have visited Asia and returned home to Europe and North America and put what they have found into practice in their productions. Like raiders across a frontier, they bring back strange clothes as their loot and try to wear them as if to the manner born. Costumes, make-up, masks, music, dances, staging techniques, and (sometimes) texts are all carried off in this way.

Russell-Brown's advice to Mnouchkine is to renounce exotic trappings and focus on the realities of serving the local audience. Certainly in light of globalisation and Western colonial history, uncomfortable questions arise, such as the one asked by Gisèle Sapiro in the opening lines of Translatio: has globalisation been favourable to international cultural exchanges and the mixing of cultures or has it been the illustration of economic imperialism?

accompanied by cultural hegemony? It also seems to me that Mnouchkine's practice falls into the contradictory state that Pavis highlights in relation to intercultural theatre in Le Théâtre au croisement des cultures:

L'interculturalisme théâtral n'échappe pas aux contradictions historiques de notre époque, même si pour faire sa propre théorie et produire ses fruits les plus délicats, il aimerait bien les mettre un instant entre parenthèses, histoire de se faire rencontrer deux cultures et de voir ce qu'elles ont à se dire et comment elles pourront s'aimer.

Nevertheless, as Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo have argued, there is a danger of artistic stagnation if criticism of intercultural practices is pushed too far:

Moral critiques, while absolutely essential to the politicizing of interculturalism, risk instigating a kind of paralysis insofar as they suggest that virtually no form of theatrical exchange can be ethical. This position is clearly untenable for a number of practitioners, especially those whose art is derived from (and aims to explore) experiences of cultural hybridity.

Such indeed would appear to have been Ariane Mnouchkine's position, for whom the cultural serves to highlight a political message as well as to mark difference from what was on offer in other French theatres. Indeed, her reliance on intercultural techniques is a corollary of her positioning in the "intervalle" between institutional state and private theatres. When asked in interview, Mnouchkine explained that she could not see herself working at an institutional theatre, since she felt quite strongly that she would have less freedom. Describing the Théâtre de l'Odéon, she noted that the conditions, the building, the corridors all had an influence on the production and that what she considered superfluous (mainly additional administrative space) had a

40 Mnouchkine in conversation with René Solis, Libération, 2 January 1990, pp. 36-37.
41 Dort, op. cit., p. 54.
negative and restrictive effect. Thus Mnouchkine’s productions have always looked to step beyond boundaries and deal with myth, whether that of the French revolution (1789), masque play (L’Age d’or), or great literary monuments (Les Shakespeare, Les Atrides).

**Universal Aspirations**

The universal qualities attributed to such myths and literary classics are such that a dialectics of distancing is opened up in Mnouchkine’s work, as David Bradby explains:

> Par ses recherches approfondies dans les arts et les traditions de l’acteur, Mnouchkine s’arrogate le droit de faire de son théâtre un lieu où on essaie de mesurer la distance de soi à l’autre, sur le plan personnel, politique ou géographique. Les images d’une très grande beauté plastique et le déploiement d’énergie éblouissant des meilleurs moments de ces mises en scène font partie d’une vision passionnée qui refuse les séparations, partitions, déchirements et cruautés de l’histoire récente au nom d’un humanisme universel.

Mnouchkine highlights distance and difference between individuals, groups and cultures, but also the connections that exist, by engaging with works so well-known that they need to be framed in a different light. Yet in so doing, she draws attention to her own commentary, as Pavis explains, in epic theatre “on sent toujours la présence du narrateur-historien”.

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**Mobiles et légitimation de l’écriture dans les mémoires de femmes au XVIIe siècle**

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Les différences formelles entre l’autobiographie et les mémoires sont l’objet d’un certain consensus parmi les historiens de la littérature, et cela malgré les éléments que partagent évidemment ces deux genres littéraires. Or, les mémoires signées de femmes sous l’Ancien Régime semblent parfois troubler ce consensus, sans toutefois jamais le mettre sérieusement en doute. Prenez comme illustration André Bertièr, qui dans son étude des Mémoires du Cardinal de Retz prétend que l’enivrissement de l’individu dans la narration signale justement une “faiblesse bien féminine qu’on observe chez Marguerite de Valois comme chez la Grande Mademoiselle [...] nous sentons que l’œuvre ne répond qu’imparfaitement à ce que nous entendons aujourd’hui par Mémoires et qu’elle coquette avec les genres voisins”;1 des genres tels que l’autobiographie, bien entendu. Mais ce qu’un critique a pu percevoir comme “imperfection” et “faiblesse féminine”, constitue, aux yeux d’une autre – Éliane Viennot “un geste fondateur”, qui consiste non seulement à s’exprimer par le je, “qui prend à sa charge ce qu’elle a à dire”, mais aussi à “faire de sa vie, de sa personne, la matière d’un récit, et le faire hors de toute obligation”.2

Nous verrons néanmoins que dans d’autres mémoires signées par des femmes dans la période qui suit la rédaction des Mémoires de Marguerite, le geste scriptural n’est jamais posé sans que la nécessité ou l’obligation d’écrire ne soit également signalée, voire soulignée. Dans ces textes, il faut toujours justifier le geste scriptural. Est-ce pour autant dire que le besoin de justification s’avère plus prononcé chez les femmes que chez les hommes.

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