CHAPTER 9

Pop Music Adaptations of Aeschylus’ Plays: What Kind of Rock was Prometheus Fastened to?

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9.1 Introduction

One manner in which the cultural divide between 5th century Athens and contemporary America has been bridged within production/adaptation is through the use of music. Adaptations shape audience perceptions of Greek tragedy by filtering it through the elements and tropes of the music employed in the adaptation. Elsewhere in this volume, Sarah Brown Ferrario and Dana L. Munteanu in separate chapters explore Aeschylus adapted as opera, itself until recently a popular form, the latter arguing that Aeschylean adaptation changed as musical tastes changed. A growing trend for the past three decades has been the appropriation of popular music styles into productions of classical plays. While Shakespeare has dominated the trend, Greek tragedy in general and the plays of Aeschylus in particular have not been immune, with several adaptations using pop music (rock, hip hop, etc.) to translate not only the Greek tragic experience but to shape the reception of Aeschylus by contemporary American audiences.

Pop music-mediated productions of Aeschylus reinscribe the plays using a new series of referents, Americanizing the plays and blending them with elements of youth culture and pop culture. After examining the double reception of pop music adaptations of Aeschylus’ dramas for performance, I will consider the appropriation/adaptation of four kinds of pop music into four productions of Aeschylus’ plays: Will Power’s The Seven, (a hip-hop “ad-raptation” of Seven Against Thebes, developed between 2001 and 2008), Dizzy Miss Lizzie’s bluegrass/country-rock version of The Oresteia, performed in 2009, the American Repertory Theatre’s 2011 rock production of Prometheus Bound, and the Troubadours’ 2014 Abbamemnon, which filtered the first play of The Oresteia through disco culture in general and the music of Swedish pop group ABBA specifically, each of which approaches the plays of Aeschylus in a different way in order to shape the reception of the original through pop music.

I find myself in agreement with Lorna Hardwick who, elsewhere in this volume states, “Symbolic rewriting may enhance rather than destroy the aesthetic and political agency of trauma.” I would further argue that the musical styles
employed in adaptation bring their own history of narrative of trauma as well as a mechanism for coping with and healing trauma. Hip-hop engages urban trauma, bluegrass was born out of the hardscrabble existence in Appalachia and its songs explore the trauma caused by the railroad, lost or unrequited love, and the challenges of farming and mining, while rock and roll, a music of youth and rebellion, could not exist without traumatic narrative. The music used to adapt Aeschylus frequently reshapes the original play’s trauma by serving as a vehicle for making that trauma accessible to contemporary audiences, and in doing so, gives these plays agency in the present.

I thus must disagree somewhat that adaptation is a trauma to the original text. Trauma is an injury caused by external force, whether physical trauma or emotional trauma. Yet in the case of adaptation the original text remains unharmed, existing side by side with the adaptation. Those who perceive in adaptation a desecration to the original seem to ignore the idea of trauma being necessary not only for tragedy, but for catharsis. Aristotle’s theory of catharsis as a cure for theatre-induced post traumatic (or should I say dramatic) stress seems to suggest that the original tragedy itself is traumatic by nature.

In one sense, all contemporary productions of Greek tragedy are double translations, adaptations filtered through contemporary sensibilities both in terms of the spoken language of the play and also the visual and referential cultures of production. Rock and pop Aeschylus thus involves double reception, in which the Greek original is filtered through both popular music and popular audience conceptions of “Greek tragedy”, and the public performance is received as both. The overall concern, if reviews of the productions below are consulted, is the relevancy of Greek tragedy to us today and the authenticity of an adaptation. Multiple reviews of the American Repertory Theatre’s Prometheus Bound cite how “relevant” the tragedy is to the world today in terms of its themes of resistance to tyranny. It is also relevant in another sense: it appeals to young audiences who are more likely to go to concerts than classical theatre: “[Prometheus is] still the Titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind, and got chained to a mountainside for his troubles; but he’s also every eyeliner-wearing, damn-The-Man scene kid who ever got grounded for staying out late and huffing paint,” proclaimed the review in Time Out Boston.¹

Multiple reviews of Will Power’s The Seven, on the other hand, expressed concerns of authenticity: it is hip-hop, but is it Aeschylus? In pop music appropriations of Aeschylus, the goals of relevancy and authenticity stand in tension. Can the audience relate to Aeschylus’ play, and what themes of the play