

# Voices of Trauma: Remaking Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in the Twentieth Century

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## 11.1 Introduction

This chapter moves away from rigid distinctions between the categories of translation, adaptation, and remaking and explores how these overlap in their relationship to Aeschylus' text and to the literary traditions in which the new work is itself embedded.<sup>1</sup> Any reading or performance, including those in the original language and theatre space, involves a process of aesthetic and intellectual translation and re-interpretation. Thus the performance and literary histories of Aeschylus' plays require and enable interplay between the specificities of the moments and contexts of any particular reception and their temporal, spatial and cultural trajectories. When an example is compared with other performances and readings the result is a "thick" critical mass of understanding.<sup>2</sup> In their contribution to this volume ("My poetry did not die with me': Aeschylus and His Afterlife in the Classical Period"), Hanink and Uhlig analyze how Aeschylus' plays were performed and adapted in antiquity. Their approach provides a very useful corrective to simplistic ancient/modern divides in typologies of reception.

Aeschylus was remaking mythological narratives through performance and that aesthetic practice was adapted by his successors in antiquity. Analysis from a 21st-century perspective has to take account of that constantly evolving dynamic. It also has to take account of the multiple agencies involved. Deborah H. Roberts' chapter in this volume puts collaborations prominently on the agenda. In Roberts' case, her emphasis is on collaborations between scholars and poets in working with *Seven against Thebes*. This is one thread in a wider web of collaborations. Some of these involve a group of theatre practitioners, translators, re-writers, and audiences who come together in the context of performance creation. Other "collaborations" are not synchronic but result from

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1 As the playwright Timberlake Wertenbaker put it, "if anything is altered, it's an adaptation" (*In Conversation with Margaret Williamson*, Classics Centre, Oxford, 1 December 2012).

2 David Hopkins (2010: 13).

exposure and creative response to the iterative dynamic of the replaying and rewritings of Aeschylus' works.

Research on the hermeneutic nexus created by translations, adaptations and remakes has frequently emphasized the accretion of elements that adhere to the source text and may progressively change its character. However, in this discussion I refocus the lens to include examination of the other side of the coin: aspects of Aeschylus' poetic imagination that persist even when rewritings and restagings seem to shift the cultural perspective. The agency of a source text has a formal, poetic and theatrical dynamic that triggers and shapes subsequent realizations of the play. That agency is also nurtured by its contexts and referents, especially when both the ancient and modern texts are rooted in human experiences such as violence, suffering, pain, love.

This chapter focuses on how memory of the trauma associated with violence and war is actualized, refined and passed on through translation and rewriting of Aeschylus. In order to explore such conjunctions, my discussion focuses on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and explores two main areas in modern translation, adaptation and remaking. The first is the iteration of poetic images associated with trauma. This will be considered through comparison between passages in *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus and the translation by Louis MacNeice (1936). The second is the affective communication of violence and attitudes to it, including its capacity to reveal fault lines in the persona and environment of the modern writer (which may then link back to the material and metaphorical persistence of trauma). As an example of this, I examine the presentation of the Watchman and Cassandra in Seamus Heaney's poem "Mycenae Lookout" (1996), which includes a literary reworking of parts of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

These examples challenge some aspects of Slavoj Žižek's claim that subsequent rewritings of an iconic text necessarily erase or repress the substance of traumatic encounters or that the structural persistence of trauma resists rewriting.<sup>3</sup> Contra Žižek, I suggest that such tensions can be creative. Symbolic rewriting may enhance rather than destroy the aesthetic and political agency of trauma.<sup>4</sup> In Aeschylus, when Clytemnestra addresses the Chorus on Agamemnon's return from Troy she uses the lexis of trauma to signify wounds that he was rumored to have suffered (line 866). However, she extends the metaphor to liken the effect to the holes of a net, an ironic anticipation of his imminent death at her hands. MacNeice translated the image as: "then he

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3 Slavoj Žižek (2000: 676).

4 For discussion of the theory and praxis of interruption, see Bonnie Honig, 2013, Part 1. The epigraph to her Introduction includes Walter Benjamin's claim that "To cite a text means to interrupt its context" (Honig, 2013: 1).