

# **Ancient Greek Theatre and the Theatre of the World**

## **The Case of the Tauric Iphigenia**

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Ancient Greek drama is now performed in every part of the world: from Manipur in northeast India to Melbourne, Australia; from Bolivia to Peking; from Newfoundland to the Transvaal; Tokyo to Montreal; St Petersburg to Buenos Aires; and of course, repeatedly, in Delphi, Epidauros, and Athens. It is performed by Arabs and Israelis; by Greeks, Cypriots and Turks; by Bosnians, Serbs and Croats; by both Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. More than any other “classics” in the repertoire of world theatre, the plays first composed in ancient Greek have proven their ability to migrate between languages, cultures, religions, and contingent political circumstances. Over the last four three or four decades especially, there has been a revival of interest in Greek drama, internationally, that is completely unprecedented in scope and scale. All the plays have been performed on every continent, and dozens of new translations and adaptations are commissioned for productions every year.

The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes have travelled and penetrated culturally just as far as the works of the two other ancient Greek authors who have been translated into hundreds of languages—Homer and Aesop—and have been experienced in performance, whether “live” or on screen, more often than either of them. But the increasing globalisation of these ancient plays, although amply demonstrated in practice, of course presents an intriguing theoretical problem.

One type of response has been aesthetic. Poets, translators, and composers have been keen to experiment with the effect of elevated verse drama and an aural form that shifted between speech and song, and entailed some instrumental accompaniment. Theatre directors, designers, actors, and drama theorists, especially those engaging in postmodern experiments in the electronic age, have been attracted by the aesthetic potential of these ancient plays. Some of ancient theatre’s formal devices (for example, the messenger speech) find unexpected modern analogues in the machines we have designed for the electronic recording and retrieval of experience, such as the audio tape recorder or the split screen. The recent prominence of Greek tragedy is also connected with the so-called performative turn, the moment when physical theatre, especially in Central Europe, began

to challenge the theatre of the spoken word. Above all this process entailed an assault on the proscenium arch, with its constraining separation of the worlds of the audience and of the stage, an assault fuelled by encounters with surviving Greek theatres and with other, non-western theatrical traditions. There developed a powerful urge to explore new types of performance space (whether converted factories, roofed thrust stages, or out of doors in city parks), new configurations of audience and performers (for which the Greek chorus has proved especially useful), and the observation of performances from different angles and levels in a constantly shifting perception of the action.

The directions taken by the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century intellect and psyche have also contributed to the popularity of Greek theatre. The increasingly widespread use of psychotherapy has certainly helped to keep Greek tragedy on the public mind. Several influential psychoanalysts have used Greek tragedy, especially its fascination with children, to develop models of the human psyche going far beyond Freud's interest in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* or Jung's in his *Electra*. The ancient plays also provide an ideal site for investigating the human subject. Does it have an unchanging core—is it in some respects the same today as in classical Athens? Or do cultural changes mean that there is no permanent, essential, or lasting commonality of human experience? Producing Greek drama entails unceasing shifts between these two contrasting ways of relating to the past. Any audience of a Greek tragedy drifts between awareness of the dimension of the performance that is determined by the attitudes and tastes of our own era, and a (usually) pleasurable sense that certain dimensions of human experience transcend time. At an emotional level of apprehension there is nothing like hearing live theatrical delivery of speeches first formulated thousands of years ago, even in a quite different language, to bring this tension home.

Greek tragic ethics have offered our era opportunities for exploring modern problems of crime and punishment. Many of the plays, especially the conclusion of *Children of Heracles*, ask whether the emotional need for revenge on the part of victims of serious crime and their families should be a factor in the way that decisions about punishment are made and implemented. *Hecuba* asks, to what sort of trial, in front of what sort of tribunal, should political and military leaders accused of war crimes be subject? *Medea*, who does plan her murders but only under enormous pressure of time, challenges the distinction between premeditated murder and suddenly provoked manslaughter. She and other tragic

criminals certainly allow exploration of the topical relationship between crime and physiological factors—hormones, genes, mental disturbance, or neurological breakdown.

Yet it is the gods on whom the suffering of many tragic characters is blamed, and it is the gods who provide a further possible answer to the question of Greek tragedy's relevance today. The opportunity to create charged, spiritual atmospheres through the performance of prayer and ritual has proved attractive. Moreover, an increasingly secular world has found in the Olympian religion portrayed in the plays, their interrogatory, intellectual quality, and their interest in the workings of the human psyche, rich material through which to explore the big, unanswerable questions about metaphysics, death, and the human condition—the problem of suffering, the limits of human agency—in a multicultural, or perhaps *intercultural* way.

Other reasons for Greek drama's cultural stamina are more to do with politics and society. One has been feminism's rediscovery of ancient drama, and the appeal of ancient Greek frankness about erotic love to late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century directors interested in exploring the repercussions of the sexual revolution. The critique of conventional gender roles has led to a spotlight being cast on the role of men, and indeed on the unpalatable truth that society's view of ideal masculinity—indomitable, self-sufficient, physically powerful, decisive, emotionally controlled—has sometimes been complicit in the oppression of both women and children. The figure of Heracles in Greek tragedy has proved especially suggestive for exploring such issues. The Greeks had already asked whether this monster-slayer was a liberator of the civilised world or some kind of global terrorist, and both Sophocles' *Women of Trachis* and Euripides' *Heracles* have recently proved excellent arenas for updating the frame of that question, and confronting the audience with the trained killer whose insensitivity and disregard for his responsibilities as husband and father must turn his homecoming into a tragedy.

Greek theatre was itself born in a moment of revolutionary change, and directors have always been galvanized by its political potential. The heroine of Sophocles' *Antigone* is a hardy perennial who has protested against South African apartheid, the abuse of human rights in several countries in Latin America, and (in Anouilh's version) patriarchy in Jakarta. In Euripides' war plays, too, painful resonance has been discovered: *Trojan Women* has revealed the terrible consequences of war for people all over the world; *Hecuba* has been revived as a regular performance text since the fall of the Berlin wall. With the deepening of the third-millennium war between the USA and Islam, Greek tragedy has

become a medium for the exploration of east-west tension, and Aeschylus' *Persians* and Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* have both enjoyed marked revivals.

During the period that has seen the final stages in the slow, painful process of decolonization, especially in Africa, writers searching for new forms of identity have also found fertile material in the texts which could from one perspective be said to epitomize imperial Europe: the dramas of classical antiquity. Yet the ancient Greek language has itself proved liberating by inspiring creative writers, and has helped some dramatists from colonized countries to explore the part of their own heritage that is undeniably European. Greek drama has often felt like a root which it can be pleasurable and legitimate to dig towards, bypassing some of the pain connected with literature in the actual language of the colonial power—English, French, or Afrikaans. Interculturalism and internationalism thrive on the process of interpreting these plays, composed before the religious, political, and cultural barriers that now divide the world were fully erected, let alone set seemingly in stone.

In the second half of this paper I want to think about the uses to which a particular tragedy has been put historically, in order to present a case study in the potential of Greek dramas—regardless of the less edifying interpretations they may have received historically—to resonate powerfully and constructively as canonical works in the stage repertoire of the “global village.”

At the end of Euripides' *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*, diplomatic harmony is established by Athena on both an international and a cosmic level. The Greek youths Orestes and Pylades, who have escaped human sacrifice in the Taurians' temple of Artemis in the southwestern Crimea, are to be allowed to return safely to Greece along with Iphigenia. The chorus of Greek women, attendants of Iphigenia at the sanctuary of the Tauric Artemis, are later to be rescued and return to Greece themselves. The Taurians are to live on peacefully, but allow the Greeks to leave, along with the statue of Artemis which needs to be taken to Halae, near Brauron, in Attica (see figure 1). Nobody dies. Conflict between Greeks and barbarians is avoided. Both Greeks and barbarians, in different ways, progress from the practice of human sacrifice to a more advanced way of worshipping divinity. Moreover, it has to be said, Euripides implies that actually, in one way, his Taurian barbarians are morally superior to his Greeks. They may kill strangers, and offer them to the goddess, but the Greeks sacrifice and murder members of their own families. When Iphigenia tells Thoas

that Orestes has killed his mother, he replies, in disgust and horror, “Apollo! Even a barbarian would not do that!”



Figure 1: Vase-painting representing the recognition scene in *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*.

Of course the very removal of the cult statue of Artemis is, on one level, a reflection of Greek colonial ambition in the Black Sea. Of course the Taurians are portrayed as intellectually inferior barbarians, superstitious and primitive, who are easily tricked by Iphigenia. This is why so many versions and adaptations of the tragedy, from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries, identified the Greeks with white, Christian northern Europeans who had an inherent right to conquer the entire planet, and the Taurians with the perceived enemies of advanced and advancing civilisation. The version in Christoph Willibald Gluck’s opera *Iphigenie en Tauride* (1779) is fairly typical of this tendency: the Taurian King Thoas is a wicked tyrant, a stereotype of a Turkish *pasha*, who is killed by the brave and heroic Greeks, a fate he thoroughly deserves. The Ottoman associations can be heard loudly in it, above all in the *a la Turca* idiom of the savage dance of the Scythians. It is absolutely crucial to remember that Euripides’ play is by no means so crudely racist. His Thoas is not sexually predatory, and he holds Iphigenia in great respect. He does maintain the custom of human sacrifice to the *Parthenos*, but that is out of piety and respect for ancestral tradition. Iphigenia, although perfectly happy to deceive him in order to save her brother and secure her own escape, is outraged when Orestes suggests that they murder Thoas. Her chorus are meticulously respectful of the indigenous Taurian goddess, her

statue (which the gods had dropped from the sky onto Taurian land), and all the ceremonies and tabus that her cult entails.

Gluck—or rather his librettist Nicolas-François Guillard—was working within the canonical tradition of interpreting the ancient play which had been established much earlier. The first Renaissance version of *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* was Giovanni Rucellai's attempt to turn the ancient Greek play into a tragedy acceptable to contemporary Christian readers and spectators, his *Oreste* of 1525. In Rucellai's version, the description of the statue of Artemis' revulsion at Orestes' pollution shows the influence of the miracle tradition, while Iphigenia conducts herself with the emphatic chastity of a Roman Catholic nun devoted to the Virgin Mary. Like his close friend Gian Giorgio Trissino, often regarded as the founder of neoclassical drama, Rucellai wanted to create a new literary play that utilised what he saw as the best the ancient world had to offer in the service of Christian humanism. His play's ultimate importance lies, however, in its circulation as an example of a modern tragedy closely based on an ancient one but interpreted in a way that fitted a culture defining itself in opposition to the Ottoman Empire. It was as a statement of Christian belief in the face of barbarous false religion that the myth of Iphigenia among the Taurians was subsequently to develop its reputation—and eventually its stage presence—in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The earliest surviving staged adaptation was one by Charles Davenant, performed in London in 1677. It was called *Circe*, because it imported the famous Odyssean enchantress into the tragic plot by marrying her to Thoas. The outlandish setting is associated with the Ottoman Empire, for example through the name of Thoas' daughter, Osmida. The equation of the Turks with the barbarian opponents of Greeks to be found in ancient tragedy was facilitated by the growing awareness, in the later part of the seventeenth century, of the continued existence of Greek culture and language in Greece. This awareness was fostered by Milton's interest in Greece and by the social prominence of Greek visitors to England, who were sponsored by Charles II himself. Davenant's play was adapted into a much lighter, spectacular musical comedy, revived repeatedly until the 1720s, and was an outstanding commercial success. In this entertainment, the barbarous Ottoman King Thoas was invariably humiliated and vanquished, and usually actually killed. The same is true of almost all of the ensuing flood of operas, dramas, (and later ballets) on the theme, from the Minato/Drighi *Il tempio di Diana in Taurica* (which premiered in Vienna in 1678, just five years before the Ottoman siege of the city) onwards. Librettists persistently adapted the

Euripidean story so as to remove all its ethical complexity, and exacerbate the conflict between Greek and Taurian, with an Ottomanised, cruel, and licentious Thoas, a far less interesting character. Euripides' humane drama became transformed into a violent and often sexualised escape fantasy that bolstered the European and Christian self-image.

Similarly monochrome politics underpin Handel's *Oreste*, performed in London in 1734, and derived ultimately from Gianguelferto Barlocchi's *L'Oreste*, written for Benedetto Michaeli's opera of that name (performed in Rome in 1723). The premise of such entertainments is the crude, binary contrast between enlightened Europeans and the unenlightened inhabitants of the places to which superior naval technology enabled them to travel. The Handelian Thoas is both wicked tyrant and sexual predator, and is justly killed when the Greeks restore liberty to his rebellious people. Handel's *Oreste* heralds the fate of *Iphigenia in Tauris* for the next century and a half, during which it was rediscovered as an elevated text for serious adaptation in opera, in particular Tommaso Traetta's *Iphigenia in Tauride* (1763), and subsequently Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*. Gluck's opera was an astonishing success, performed more than ninety times between 1779 and 1787 in Paris alone.

By the later eighteenth century, the geographical setting of the Euripidean play had become a crucially important region once again in the mind of Europe. Many accounts of European travellers to the region stress the luxuriousness and the savagery of the infidel inhabitants, and the ancient story of an intelligent heroine's escape from a backward and religious barbarian community will have had immediate, contemporary reverberations that we would do well to remember. Ottoman forces were still attempting to besiege Vienna in 1683; they failed, but between that year and the treaty of Jassy in 1792, Turkey was at war with either Austria or Russia for no fewer than forty-one years. The Turks made notable advances in the years leading up to 1740, and it was not until the 1770s that the Ottoman Empire ceased to look like an immediately pressing threat to Christian civilization at large, rather than just the countries it occupied. The turning point was the Russian-Turkish war of 1768–1774, by the end of which the Western powers agreed that the Russians were a worse threat to European stability.

“The Ukraine will become a new Greece,” predicted Johann Gottfried Herder in his travel journal in 1769, and once Grigori Potemkin had annexed the Crimea in 1783, the creation of a revived ancient Greece in the northern Black Sea—the most telling of symbols of European resistance against the Ottoman Empire—became almost inevitable. Euripides'

Black Sea drama, in a particular and rather crude interpretation, then played a crucial role in the reinvention of the Crimean peninsula by Catherine the Great and Potemkin, who was restyled “Prince of Tauride” by his imperial lover Prince Grigori Alexandrovich Potemkin-Tavricheski, in recognition of his acquisition for Russia of this symbolically crucial space. The stunning neoclassical palace Catherine built for Potemkin in St. Petersburg was called the “Tauride Palace.” Re-Hellenising the Crimea sent Catherine and her acolytes hurrying to rediscover everything they could about this strategically invaluable peninsula in Greco-Roman antiquity. They unearthed the ancient Greek names for towns, bays, and mountain ranges, and relived all the stories they could find associated with the territory in the pagan era. Gluck’s opera—a favourite across all of Europe—meant that the reinvention of classical “Tauris” became inevitable. It had been, of course, a performance of this opera in Vienna in 1781 with which Joseph II had welcomed Catherine’s second grandson to the Habsburg capital.

Six years later, in January 1787, eager for an exciting adventure, Catherine embarked on the notorious tour of her empire, which culminated in the newly acquired Crimea. Over the gate through which she passed into the newly founded city of Kherson (separate from the ancient site at Chersonesos) was the inscription: “this is the way to Byzantium.” The annexation of the Crimea provided a welcome opportunity for Russia to claim the status of a western-style empire. By adopting western techniques of portraying barbarians, Russia was able to describe itself as comparatively “more European” than peoples such as the Ottoman Turks and the Crimean Tatars. Along with the defence of the Crimean Greeks against Scythian enemies in the second century BCE by Mithridates VI Eupator, by far the most important ancient narrative in this ideological programme was the encounter between the Greeks and the Taurians—but not quite as dramatised in Euripides’ archetypal Crimean adventure story.

Catherine presented her journey as the mission of an enlightened European princess to a land retarded by oriental despotism. The party visited what could then be seen of the ruins of ancient Chersonesos, near the fortress of Sevastopol; but according to Catherine and her associates, the actual location of the temple was on a more southerly tip of the peninsula, at a spot known as “Parthenizza.” In a fantasy clearly informed by the tradition of the escape plot, the Prince de Ligne (who was obsessed with the *Iphigenia in Tauris* and believed that the estate Catherine bestowed on him in the Crimea had been the setting of the action in Euripides’ play) speculated on what “Europe” would think if the whole party,



including Catherine herself, were to be carried off and delivered as prisoners to the barbaric court of the sultan in Constantinople.

Some important steps towards returning to Euripides' infinitely more humane and complex picture of the relationship between Greek and non-Greek were taken by Goethe. His *Iphigenie auf Tauris*, the poetic text of which was finalised in 1786, was certainly the most important turning point in the history of the reception of Euripides' tragedy. For the first time since antiquity, the story was allowed to end in relative harmony, with the statue of Artemis even remaining in the Tauric Chersonese, and King Thoas acquiescing in the departure of the captive Greeks. Goethe was himself resistant to the idea that literature was closely related to nationalism, and indeed in 1827 invented the term *Weltliteratur* to describe works, like Greek drama, which could succeed in translation and thus be enjoyed on other than national or nationalist levels. But he was no "multiculturalist," since he warned overtly against showing excessive respect towards either non-European (Chinese) or even "minor" European literary traditions (Serbian), as well as putting German-language literature on any kind of exceptionalist pedestal. But the context in which he uses the term *Weltliteratur* also implies that this new transnational medium is indeed somehow being led by German literature. The model of the idealized ancient Hellas in Goethe's *Iphigenie auf Tauris* certainly remains Eurocentric, even if it is expressed in Romantic humanist terms rather than Christian ones.

Yet it was certainly Goethe's version which freed the ancient Greek tragedy to play more complex, psychological roles in defining the global as well as the European regional identities of the twentieth century. In the brilliant autobiographical *Ifigenia Cruel* by the modernist poet Alfonso Reyes (1924), "Tauris" even becomes the European motherland Spain in opposition to the violent Greece of Mexico. A refugee from Mexican political unrest which had killed his father, Reyes found in Spain a place where he could liberate himself from his family's painful past. This process is reflected in his Iphigenia's amnesia and her ultimate decision not to return to Greece at all. The land of the Taurians has here become completely detached from any Crimean geographical reality, and represents something quite other: the promise that a new start, even if in "Old" Europe, can offer to a fugitive from the personal and political injuries inflicted upon him and upon his immediate ancestors who had emigrated to the New World.

My long-standing fascination with this Euripidean masterwork began when I was researching the presentation of non-Greeks in Greek tragedy. It has inspired me to write a

book-length study of its role in the transmission of cultural Hellenism, an enterprise which has kindly been supported by the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (USA). But it has also convinced me that the time is ripe for a new performance version of this drama, which is both very funny and very sad, a bittersweet story of loyalty and escape from the crippling psychological load of history. It acknowledges the suffering caused by wars, atrocities, and international tension (all of which the Crimea has of course seen in abundance over the centuries), but offers a more optimistic dream of a world in which people forgive each other and move on, in peace, with a new hybrid culture. I have persuaded the British poet and dramatist Tony Harrison to create a new version of Euripides' *Iphigenia Among the Taurians* which will be performed in the UK in 2012—the anniversary of the first English-language performance of Euripides' play, in the translation of Gilbert Murray, in 1912 (figure 2).



Figure 2: Lillah McCarthy as Iphigenia in 1912

Murray was himself a great advocate of international Hellenism. He was inspired by the example of ancient Greek cosmopolitan thought when he collaborated on the foundation of the League of Nations—subsequently the United Nations—in 1919–1920.

The excavation of the ancient theatre at Chersonesos—the most northerly surviving Greek theatre—near Sevastopol, in the area of the ancient Greek colony where the play is set, has created the possibility of staging plays there (figure 3).



Figure 3: The Greek theatre at Chersonesos

We have been encouraged in our tentative plan actually to stage the play in the ancient land of the Taurians by Professor Joseph Carter, Director of the Institute of Classical Archaeology at the University of Texas at Austin, who has been working with the National Preserve of Tauric Chersonesos to draw international attention to the site. We plan to enlist major press interest in our project, the goal of which is physically to follow the path taken by Orestes as he travelled looking for his sister and the statue of Artemis, thus underlining the international scope and spread of ancient Greek myth and theatre.

The production, with a cast of fifteen and specially commissioned music, will open in London in late May or early June 2012. There will then be touring performances in Oxford and Edinburgh. We hope then to bring the production to Delphi in late June and early July before a final performance—the ultimate goal of the whole enterprise: the play will be performed, for the first time since antiquity, in the theatre of Chersonesos itself, the ancient Crimean centre of the cult of the Parthenos, Artemis. This performance will take place in mid-July, well before the opening of the 2012 Olympics in London on 27 July. Key international figures in the arts and culture will be invited to attend.

The play is the archetypal dramatisation of an encounter between different ethnic groups on a faraway coast—the Greek equivalent of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The encounter begins with mutual suspicion, violence, and the threat of death to the Greeks who have arrived on foreign soil; but the conflict is resolved and old psychological wounds are healed. Moreover, the ending celebrates the positive aspects of cultural exchange: Thoas and his Taurians agree to let the Greeks go in peace, and Greek religion is enriched by its contact with the Taurians' cult of Artemis. The play is a symbolic meditation on the potential of intercultural contact, written when the Athenians were building communities in the Black Sea. The planned productions would allow Taurian Artemis to move symbolically between Greece and the rest of the world in a performance of great beauty and emotional power.

There could be no better play with which to celebrate the global impact of Greek literature and myth, its crucial role in internationalism, and the two-way process of cultural fertilisation that the spread of ancient Hellenic culture across the planet has entailed. These will be performances with a new vision for the third millennium, taking place in the very ancient places, both Greek and non-Greek, which were home to Iphigenia and Artemis' statue.