

The Lion and the Cat

In Anne Carson's telling of the Atreus saga, humor is a happy accident

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Anne Carson

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ANCIENT GREEK GRABS HOLD OF YOU. EACH word has an agenda, striking to get at the essence of things—talking around meaning as a way to highlight it, encompassing in single words a thing's origin, its present state and where it's headed. For its Anglophone students, words that translate into phrases like “griefremembering pain,” “childstrength” or “husbandloving ways,” enrich our relationship to English and unlock a fresh understanding of the unchanging human condition. As Goethe said, “He who knows nothing of a foreign language, knows nothing of his own”—and Greek is the database of languages.

“Ancient Greek is like a big lion turning and turning in place before lying down,” notes poet and classicist Anne Carson. “And English a little jumpy cat.” But if the Canadian-born professor of classics at University of Michigan–Ann Arbor speaks English as if she's translating from the Greek—getting at meaning in a slower, more roundabout way—she conversely peppers her poems and translations with eye-opening, at times hilarious, idiom. Consider her unique three-part retelling of the classicist's classic, the fall of the House of Atreus, titled *An Oresteia* and running March 18–April 12 at Classic Stage Company in New York City. The Chorus to Agamemnon: “I have to admit, when you sent the army after Helen, I wrote you off as a loose cannon.” The Chorus on Helen: “Then clasps her white arms over her face / To beat

a retreat out of that place.” These word choices feel rather more *juste* than anachronistic, and have the added benefit of lightening the mood. “You have to keep the surface moving fast. Audiences have brief attention spans nowadays,” Carson says with unabashed utility.

But even Carson didn't know how funny her renditions—based on Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Electra* and bad-boy Euripides' *Orestes*—were until she saw early readings of the work in Classic Stage's First Look Festival this past spring. The audience roared with laughter in between devastating moments of rapt silence as the prototypically dysfunctional family went about destroying itself, giving the tragedies a more immediate aliveness than is usually attributed to them. Carson is not sure how she feels about the humor of the plays, saying she has not added any jokes to the text and is giving us exactly what the Greek says. “It's the shallowness and velocity of English as a language that perhaps makes the humor jut out more,” she theorizes. This happy accident of language provides an emotional contrast and catharsis, simultaneously closer to home and more powerful. Classical gravitas combined with contemporary flip can make for a surprisingly harmonious voice with a poet's touch.

According to CSC artistic director Brian Kulick, Carson's use of idiom is a stylistic choice organic to the Greeks,

whose “classical conundrum” was that they were forbidden to depict contemporary politics on stage. Playwrights had to covertly portray current affairs while telling stories of conflicts comfortably bygone. By enlisting history and an old/new dichotomy to write about their present time, the playwrights’ voices were freed. “The dialectic of the archaic and the everyday are part of the DNA of these plays,” Kulick notes. Kulick commissioned Carson to complete the trilogy with *Agamemnon* after seeing her *Electra* many years ago and a reading of *Orestes* at the 92nd Street Y. The first two plays, *Agamemnon* and *Electra*, will be presented in one night, followed by *Orestes* on a second evening.

PITCHING FROM IDEALISTIC HOPE to utter cynicism over the course of the century that gave us democracy, theatre and the Olympics (to name a few of that society’s innovations), the Aeschylus-to-Euripides trajectory as captured by Carson maps almost eerily onto a globe that may have changed politically, technologically and morally but remains as fraught and fragmented as 2,500 years ago. Lines like “evil disguised as virtue

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is the paranoia of broken-down minds” raise the inescapable question: Are human beings chronically unable to learn from history?

The unique marriage of our three extant tragedians relating a story usually told in toto by Aeschylus creates a great theatrical opportunity. “If Aeschylus is *The Godfather*, Sophocles is *GoodFellas* and Euripides is “The Sopranos,” analogizes Kulick. Carson respectively calls the playwrights “forest, ship and carousel.” The span of time from World War II to the Iraq war could be compared with this period in Greek history, with Aeschylus’s more ideological trilogy ending in a celebration of Athenian democracy, Sophocles complicating the idealistic notion of national pride, and Euripides turning it all on its head with *Orestes*—what Kulick

calls the “nervous breakdown” of the trilogy, written toward the end of Athens’s protracted involvement in the Peloponnesian War and the citizenry’s resultant disenchantment. Euripides, far less popular in his lifetime than the other two playwrights, has had his more insubordinate, realistic, accessible plays widely produced in subsequent eras (18 have survived, whereas we only have 7 each from Sophocles and Aeschylus).

One of the things that’s great about Carson’s writing across her spectrum of poetry to essays and everything in between is that rather than tell the reader how to feel, she manages to leave fertile margins of space in tightly spun creations for individualized thoughts and emotions to thrive. It’s a quality of openness particularly well-matched by Euripides, who fissured Greek form and skewered self-interest in his telling of *Orestes*’ story to fragmented, thought-freeing effect. *You* get to decide how you feel.

Kulick will helm *Agamemnon* and *Electra*, with Gisela Cardenas serving as associate director on the latter, but it’s particularly fitting that the Euripides project will be directed and choreographed by Big Dance

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Theater's Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson. For the past decade Carson has been hailed as the face of the avant-garde in poetry, and the alchemy of her, Euripides and downtown, limits-pushing artists Lazar and Parson portends a cohesive artistic experience existing in the space between dance and theatre—the acting will have a dance-like precision, but the dance will be theatrical, on the cusp where movement is stylized.

"If Kulick and Cardenas are directing ancient-classic plays Annie and I are directing an ancient-contemporary one," said Lazar. For Euripides, God is already dead and the halfhearted apparition at the end of *Orestes* in classic deus ex machina form looks like something more out of Molière than the Greeks. Lazar and Parson intend to milk it. "Yet as funny as this ending us," promises Lazar, "the trilogy deserves reverence and the beauty in the final moments is essential." Parson adds that "in texts as old as this there is something inevitable. We have no idea how someone laughed, stood, embodied space—but something inevitable is expressed through body and music." Considering that the Greek plays were originally performed as

outright musicals, movement and song should be deeply rooted in their essence.

BUT CARSON'S LOVE AFFAIR IS UNDENIABLY with words. In an interview on the nationally syndicated radio show "Bookworm," host Michael Silverblatt asked Carson what writers she admires. She whispered with heartfelt tremor: "Homer. Homer is just beyond everything." But when I ask her if she would ever tackle Homer herself, she resolutely responds, "No." Readers of Carson's enigmatic, ultra-modern *Autobiography of Red*—simultaneously the most ancient and modern work I've ever read—might wonder if she claims more modern influences. In the same interview she consents to Emily Brontë and touts the "cleanliness" of Kafka: "One has the impression when one reads him that he had nothing on his mind other than the words he uses; they seem to drop right out of his mentality into language." But her explanation for her particular love of Greek is that, "Greek feels more early, raw, truthful than other Western languages. Down in the roots of itself."

In 2008, Carson wrote two theatrical

pieces, *Deer* and *Uncle Harry*, both humbly subtitled (*not a play*)—a caveat expressing her lack of confidence in the form. As a translator, she admits to working with staging in mind, and gives herself a grave charge: "Every line presents a spectrum of demands. It is important to watch out for whatever the original poet has made an effort to stress in that line: sometimes it is a basic grammatical fact, sometimes word play or sound play, sometimes a metrical event, an emotion, an image. It differs line to line. And then there are overriding considerations of sense, spectacle, consistency that form and deform decisions made on individual lines—so a constant tension of big and small worries."

But either Carson is more unconsciously comfortable in the dramatic medium than she thinks, or, when faithfully translated, the Greek plays' drama and human comedy sing on today's stage like comfortable old cabaret hands, closing the 2,500-year gap between us and fifth-century B.C. Athens with startling efficiency. 🎭

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