



Research project

The rewriting the myth of the Atreides in contemporary Greek theatre forms, patterns and functions

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Abstract

The project, intended as a part of *Classical Reception Studies*, aimed to study the theatrical rewritings of the myth of the Atreides in the poetic and dramatic production of contemporary Greece, from the 1970s to the 2000s, in order to explore a genre that has been continuously approached since antiquity, in which modern Greek culture seeks its identity roots. In addition to the need to fill a gap in Italian studies in this direction, the project responds to the issue of the enhancement of ancient literature in high schools, with the aim of stimulating a virtuous impact on the teaching of classical languages and literatures.

The project's argument

The story of the Atreides family, as represented by Aeschylus' in the *Oresteia* (458 BC) with the long chain of "crimes that generate crimes" (Aesch. *Ag.*, vv. 758-759), starting from the sacrifice of the young Iphigenia by her father Agamemnon, proud ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν (*Il.* 1,6), then with the husband murder by Clytemnestra and finally with the matricide by Orestes, who has to deal with a terrible ἀμαρτία for the rest of his life, had an uninterrupted fortune in terms of tradition and reception, continuing to fascinate both intellectuals and scholars and poets and playwrights.¹

¹ Recent is the conference entitled *Il Mito degli Atridi dal teatro antico all'epoca contemporanea* organized by L. Carrara and E. Medda of the University of Pisa (26-27 May 2022), where the various interventions explored the fortune of the aforementioned myth already in antiquity (from Euripides to the Comedy) up to the contemporary age. In terms of reception, however, there have been numerous rewritings in the modern and contemporary age of the events relating to the heroines of the saga of the Atreides, Electra and Iphigenia (see G. Avezzi, *Elettra. Variazioni sul mito: Sofocle, Euripide, Hoffmannsthal, Yourcenar*, Venezia 2002 and C. Barone, *Ifigenia, variazioni sul mito: Euripide, Racine, Goethe, Ritsos*, Venezia 2014) and significant was the research on the myth narrative by T.S.Eliot, whose "mythical method" explained in the essay *Ulysses, Order and Myth* (1923) took shape in the drama *The Family Reunion* (1939); subsequently, P.P. dedicated particular attention to the same myth. Pasolini, first with the translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* for the Greek Theater of Syracuse in 1959, then with the writing of the drama *Pilade* in 1967 and finally with the creation of the film *Appunti un'Orestide Africana* in 1968-69. Regarding the paradigmatic value of the story, the anthropological and psychoanalytic interpretations of matricide and family relationships among the Atreides, a recent synthesis is considered in E.Cantarella, *Il conflitto tra genitori e figli nel mondo antico*, Milano 2015; finally some reflections in D. Susanetti, *L'altrove della tragedia greca: scene, parole e*



From an artistic point of view, i.e. *literary reception*, the need to continuously explore the ancient myth and its paradigmatic values, as expressed above all in the tragic genre, has realized over the centuries in the practice of rewriting as “different articulation possible of a literary content”, “discourse of re-use”,² whose theatrical declination is already an ancient practice: not only reworking of the myth as a hypotext, but also variation of the already known tragic material. Indicative in this sense, as far as the saga of the Atreides is concerned, were Sophocles’ Aeschylean reflections in the *Electra* (418/417 BC) and those of Euripides relating to the events of the entire family – in the *Electra* and *Iphigenia in Tauris* (413 BC), in *Orestes* and in *Iphigenia in Aulis* (408-406 BC) – with the resulting intertextual dialogue and the incessant “repetition without reply”³ that this mythical and tragic story has had in Western literature, up to the present day. Interesting and suggestive, but so far little explored by Italian *Reception Studies*, appear the rewritings of Greek poets and playwrights of the twentieth and twenty first century. In fact, there are numerous contemporary Greek works, from the end of the nineteenth century to today, dedicated to the myth of the Atreides.⁴ Among them, the dramas *Letter to Orestes* and *The Supper* by Iakovos Kambanellis stand out as worthy of particular attention - primarily due to the fame enjoyed by the authors and the importance of their production; the four poems by Ghiannis Ritsos explicitly referring to the Atreides in the work entitled *Fourth Dimension*, namely *Agamemnon*, *Orestes*, *The Return of Iphigenia* and *Chrysothemis*; Zoi Karèlli’s *Orestes*,⁵ and the rewritings of contemporary poets and playwrights Andreas Flourakis (*Atreides, the end*), Dimitris Dimitriadis (*The Emptying*) and Dimitra Mitta (*For Clytemnestra*).⁶

Current state of research

Instead, regarding the academic tradition of ancient tragedy, in particular the studies on European theatrical rewritings of the modern and contemporary age, the *Classical Reception Studies* currently enjoy great attention in Italy,⁷ but there are still few studies dedicated to the works of modern Greek theatre.⁸ Translations are almost absent, just as theatrical performances are very rare. For a systematic approach to the knowledge of modern Greek theatre, in fact, it is still necessary to resort to a volume by Filippo Maria Pontani from 1962 and to a brief review by Mario Vitti from 1986.⁹ The recent,

immagini, Roma 2023 and in G. Zanetto, *Miti di ieri, storie di oggi. La tragedia greca racconta le passioni e il destino del nostro mondo*, Milano 2020.

² See H. Lausberg, *Elementi di retorica*, Bologna 1969, pp. 16-17.

³ De Cristofaro, 2020, p. 138.

⁴ I report some of them in chronological order of composition, with a purely working translation of the titles: Alexandra Papadopoulou, *Clitennestra*, 1893; Panaghis Lekatsas, *Ifigenia*, 1939; Alexandros Matsas, *Clitennestra*, 1945; Thanos Katzòpoulos, *Atridi*, 1961; Nikos Bakolàs, *Il giardino dei Principi*, 1966; Evangelhos Averof-Tositsas, *Ritorno a Micene*, 1973; Iannis Chatzis, *Un piccolo commento all’Ifigenia in Aulide*, 1976.

⁵ Καμπανέλλης, 1994; Ρίτσος, 1972; Καρέλλη, 1971.

⁶ A synopsis of Flourakis’ drama, not yet published in volume, with the list of stage performances can be consulted in <https://www.andreasflourakis.com/el/atreides-telos>; Δημητριάδης, 2013; Μήττα, 2013.

⁷ For a general overview of the question and the state of the studies, which are currently very fruitful, see Fernandelli 2022.

⁸ A valuable summary in Carpinato 2022.

⁹ F.M. Pontani, *Teatro neo-ellenico*, Milano, Nuova Accademia, 1962, M.Vitti, *Il teatro greco*, in M. Verdone, (a cura di), *Teatro contemporaneo*, vol. 3.1, pp.109-117, Roma 1986.



valuable book edited by Theodoros Grammatàs and Gilda Tentorio partially fills the gap and offers inspiration for further studies and insights.¹⁰

In the Greek theater of recent decades, especially in the period following the economic and financial crisis, there has been a conspicuous return to the ancient, both in terms of representations of classical tragedies and in terms of scenic rewritings and adaptations, an interest to be interpreted as a desire to return to the archetypes that can provide answers to the modern individual in a climate of uncertainty and generalized crisis. In this context, the study of the most recent works appears fundamental, also and above all for the lively dialogue that the authors maintain with the political, social and economic reality of their time.¹¹ The most famous works, appreciated internationally, by Dimitriadis and Flourakis reveal, in fact, a careful look at the political and social reality of contemporary Greece dealing with historical events of great importance, representing on the one hand a great allegory of the crisis. Written some years after the end of the colonels' dictatorship in Greece, the novel *Dying as a country* (1978) by Dimitriadis¹² recounts the various passions and plights of a country in a state of crisis and imminent collapse, whereas *I want a country* (2015) by Flourakis examines the aftermath of the financial crisis on a personal and collective level: the future will bring hope or despair and a polyphony of anonymous voices of young people claim their future.¹³

The Atrides of Dimitriadis and Flourakis' rewritings, as well as those of Dimitra Mitta, are represented in a reality very close to contemporary man, in which each character expresses a profound existential discomfort together with the need to explain the reasons for their actions and their soul, thus attempting to relieve him of the guilt that torments him.

The doubt, the conflicting problematic nature of the gesture that Orestes is about to perform or has already performed, the more intimately feminine reasons that led Clytemnestra to kill her husband, as well as the loss of any heroic status on the part of Agamemnon, are the elements that they also and above all characterize the dramas of Iakovos Kambanellis, Zoì Karèlli and Ghiannis Ritsos.¹⁴

Kambanellis, author of over thirty plays, profoundly renewed modern Greek theater in the 1950s, representing on stage the painful and uncomfortable reality of the suburbs and social clashes.¹⁵ His Atrides in *The Supper*, forced to confront themselves at a richly laid table beyond their earthly existence, embody the quintessence of family incommunicability.¹⁶ Just as Zoì Karèlli's Orestes – poet and playwright, fine essayist and translator – although eager to avenge his father, is assailed by profound doubts, in explicit emulation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and experiences a series of conflicts with the others characters in a family and social environment in progressive communicative and relational deterioration.

Ghiannis Ritsos (1909-1990), one of the best-known Greek poets internationally, with his vast production of over one hundred collections of poems definitely goes beyond the Generation of the

¹⁰ Grammatàs, T., Tentorio, G. (a cura di), *Sguardi sul teatro greco contemporaneo. Società, Identità, Postmoderno*, in "Culture teatrali" n. 23, 2014.

¹¹ Grammatàs 2014, p. 94-96, Carpinato 2022, p. 285.

¹² Δημητριάδης, Δ., *Πεθαίνω σαν χώρα*, Thessaloniki 2010.

¹³ Φλουράκης, Α., *Θέλω μια χώρα, Περιστέρι*, 2015, recently translated by Gilda Tentorio in *Drammaturgia europea contemporanea. Eurodram 2017*, edited by S.Resche e E.Faccioli, Spoleto 2018.

¹⁴ For a general profile of these authors and the delineation of the importance of their literary work - impossible to report here - I refer respectively to Puchner, 2010, Spiropoulou 1998 e a Caracausi, 2019.

¹⁵ 2021 was the centenary of his birth and the celebrations dedicated to him: <http://www.kambanellis.gr/βιογραφικό-2/>

¹⁶ See Pavlou 2016.



'30s building a personal poetics, nourished by intense and painful biographical experiences,¹⁷ in which the constant references to the mythological archetypes of ancient Greece stand out.¹⁸ In particular, in the *Fourth Dimension* collection, twelve out of seventeen poems are inspired by a mythological situation and at least four of them are explicitly dedicated to the saga of the Atreides. These are compositions in verse in the form of a monologue, in which - on the basis of conspicuous authorial captions and, above all, the use of "Du-Stil", they can be considered as for a scenic destination.¹⁹ It is precisely the author's descriptions and comments, contained in the captions at the beginning and end of the poems, that refer to the characters of Electra and Chrysothemis in *The Dead House* (1959) and again to Electra and Clytemnestra in *Under the shadow of the mountain* (1960), heroines who survived in an abandoned landscape and house, in a fourth dimension of time, still immobile and at the same time outside of any myth. Clear and systematic in the poems is the use of the "mythical method"²⁰ and the objective correlative with which the author can allegorically refer to reality and the age contemporary to him, to the horrors of imprisonment and dictatorship. However, the depth of the existential dimension into which the characters have fallen is no less important: finding themselves outside and beyond the time of the myth forces them to rethink their actions, their presumably heroic gestures, a rethink which ends up also making the reader of faced with the need to deal with the legacy of the classical world.

The dialogue that the modern Greek literary and theatrical world established with the ancient Greek world starting from the 18th century is still very vital and still represents an opportunity to question one's own identity and historical memory, in a process of construction that has not yet concluded.²¹

Objectives and Methodology

With this project I intend to contribute to a greater knowledge of modern Greek literature in Italy through literary practices of comparison with ancient models. The *rewriting* - to be understood as a privileged tool for adaptation and appropriation of contents and forms already typical of the ancient²² - requires the identification of a correct and adequate methodology for a literature - the modern Greek one - which among the European ones enjoys a unique and particular linguistic continuity and cultural compared to antiquity.²³

Over a three-year period it will be appropriate to articulate the research by proceeding first of all with a systematic reading in the original language of the works of Dimitriadis, Flourakis and Mitta - as they are more recent (beginning of the third millennium) - then of those of Kambanèllis and Karèlli - homologous between them due to the cultural climate - finally Ritsos' "poems", as they are eccentric compared to the dramatic genre in the strict sense; in fact, since the question of their gender is still open, their formal exploration is necessary in an attempt at a definition. This progression will firstly go in the direction of researching possible filiation and intertextual relationships between the aforementioned works. Secondly, the examination of poetic procedures will focus on the analysis of the transformation of ancient dramatic functions and on the possible lexical recoding of ancient Greek. It will therefore be a mostly formal and structural study in order to define and outline the nature of these rewritings.

¹⁷ See Kotti 2009.

¹⁸ Above all in *Repetitions* and *Fourth Dimension*; see Caracausi 2015.

¹⁹ Rotolo 1992.

²⁰ See the note n. 1.

²¹ Carpinato 2022, p. 278.

²² Sanders 2006.

²³ See Rotolo 1989 and De Rosa, M., *La lingua greca, una storia lunga quattromila anni*, ETP Books, 2019.



Finally, with a view to enhancing the Greek literary experience as fully inserted and belonging to the European overview, I believe that a didactic and pedagogical reflection is necessary for students and teachers of upper secondary schools. In the daily practice of teaching the humanities we come across it more and more often in the question of the meaning, or worse, the usefulness of classical studies.²⁴ Contributing to the debate by highlighting a part of European literature, the modern Greek one, which - thanks to the diachronic character of the language is in a privileged position with respect to this heritage - I believe could be of great help. On the other hand, one of the most effective teaching strategies for dealing with the issue and for dealing with the real need of students - not always consciously expressed - to contextualize the type of studies chosen and to frame their own path, does not consist in the discussion on the theoretical; it is appropriate to provide answers by indicating a method of studying the disciplines themselves. In this sense, it is particularly functional, at the moment of the introduction of an author or a work, primarily a discussion on fortune and the reading of his rewritings, as it allows to immediately give meaning, i.e. historical perspective and cultural to a very remote content. It will therefore be appropriate to dedicate a final section of the research to the identification of valid and effective teaching practices of classical languages and literatures precisely with a view to the reception of texts. This investigation will see classical high school as the natural recipient, but possibly also other addresses where Latin is studied.²⁵ The theatrical genre - central to the Greek cultural experience - will be the most fertile ground for reflecting on its evolution, as well as on the concept of “updating”, much evoked in school classrooms to involve and excite students about ancient literature.

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²⁴ See Dionigi 2012; among the numerous and stimulating readings that are usually offered to students to guide them to reflection and to the identification of valid motivations that can support their path (especially in classical high school), perhaps above all the article by Italo Calvino, *Italiani, vi esorto ai classici*, L'Espresso, 28 giugno 1981, pp. 58-68.

²⁵ See Tappi 2000.



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