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“A Great Ox Stands Upon My Tongue” : The Refusal of Translation and the Poetics of Amnesty in Yaël Farber’s *MOLORA*

Marie Lambert

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1 In the final scenes of *MOLORA*, Yaël Farber’s contemporary adaptation of Aeschylus’ tragic *Oresteia* cycle, the character of Orestes radically diverts from the scripting of the original Greek text. Refusing to end the life of his mother, Klytemnestra, as demanded by familial duty to avenge the murder of his father—and her former husband—Orestes resolves to “rewrite this ancient end[1]”, granting Klytemnestra amnesty : her life is spared in exchange for public testimony of her crimes. This fundamental alteration to the original end of the Greek drama reveals the political dimension in Farber’s choice of the *Oresteia* as the source text for her adaptation, first performed in 2003 in Johannesburg. Nearly ten years prior to this staging, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission began hearing public testimony from the innumerable victims and perpetrators of the violence that occurred under the country’s apartheid regime, granting reparations to the former and requests for amnesty to the latter as part of a national process of accounting for more than three decades of state-sanctioned racial discrimination and human rights violations. In the introduction to the 2008 printed version of *MOLORA*’s script, based on the show’s British premiere season at the London Barbican Theatre, critic and classicist Ingrid Rowland praises Farber for her radical approach in adapting the ancient tragedy, as she “draws power from traditional stories and traditional rituals to address contemporary problems head on[2]”. To that end, Rowland further applauds Farber for her *revisions* to the dramatic conventions of Greek tragedy in making the violent reality of the apartheid state

manifest on stage : in Rowland’s words, where the ancients “hid away the most graphic events of tragedy—murder, suicide, rape—Farber shows it all [3]”. Indeed, across Farber’s oeuvre, her productions notably make full use of the spectatorial and gestural elements of the stage as a means of presenting with shocking immediacy the suffering (*pathos*) traditionally held as characteristic of tragic drama. Farber’s choice to turn the stage into a site of visceral physical conflict does break with the conventions of the fifth-century tragic stage, but it nonetheless illustrates with horrifying verisimilitude the quotidian violence of apartheid.

2 However, although *MOLORA* does not shy away from striking displays of physical as well as psychological suffering, the significance of the play’s status as an adaptation is not entirely self-evident, despite the raw physical and emotional character of the action presented. Farber’s adaptation indeed seems to obfuscate the audience’s full recognition of the citational play at work on both the tragic and historical ends of the adaptation, beginning with its title. “Molora”, the Sesotho word for “ash”, is unplaceable to the ear or in the referential context of British, Anglophone spectators, who are unable to distinguish even if it is intended as a common noun or proper name. Despite the subtitle that clarifies that the piece is “based on the *Oresteia*”, the play’s title withholds its full signification from the audience, as the referent of the eponymous “molora” receives no direct explanation or verbal translation over the course of the dramatic action. Here, this withholding of linguistic translation is but one instance in a chain of refusals throughout Farber’s piece that trouble the conventional treatment of dramatic adaptation as a genre of narrative and conceptual translation. Where the success of a dramatic adaptation *qua* adaptation is dependent upon an economy of recognition and referentiality –poetic, historical, and narrative – that “translates” and transmits new meaning *through* and *despite* the fundamental alteration of a source text, Farber’s play subverts the desire for communicability and mutual sense-making that undergirds the dynamics of translation, both in the term’s linguistic and conceptual usages. In fact, in *MOLORA*, the figure of translation, in its interlinguistic as well as conceptual sense, becomes a means for deferring or denying full recognition of the economy of references that constitute the adaptation. By obscuring referential sense-making at the

level of language and spectacle in the play, *MOLORA* demonstrates the possibility of generating unprecedented social and political imaginaries through an anti-memorial “dramatic amnesia” evoked by Farber’s techniques of non- and partial translation.

Dramatic Adaptation as Recognition of Address

3 In her director’s introduction to the printed version of *MOLORA*, Yaël Farber attests that she was compelled by the ancient Greek story of retributive murder as a powerful mode through which to articulate the “history of dispossession, violence, and human-rights violations in the country [she] grew up in[4]”. Indeed, the power of Farber’s work is – for Rowland, at least – seemingly inseparable from the means by which her adaptation functions as a doubled mode of *address* : Farber’s audience is certainly called to apprehend the tragic narrative and conventions of the ancient Greek referent (if not the source text itself), but so too to recognize the historicity and contemporaneity of the socio-political dilemmas that inform the revised South African setting.

4 Indeed, despite the likely confusion garnered by the play’s new title, Farber’s choice in retitling attests to her interest in the contemporary and global resonance of these classical dramas. In the final scene of *MOLORA*, the title’s initially unnamed referent is finally revealed onstage : falling solemnly upon the company just before the curtain closes, ash is characterized in the play’s final spoken lines as the tragic fruit of all cycles of unremitting violence, represented here in the remains once-great House of Atreus, reduced to “ash on the ground[5]”. However, Farber’s directorial notes in the published script suggest that the physical manifestation of ash here is intended to invoke not only the figurative state from which post-apartheid South Africa began to build a newly democratic nation but to further emphasize how the narrative of violence and attempted reconciliation that *MOLORA* depicts may be a metonym for a broader legacy of global and historical crises :

> From the ruins of Hiroshima, Baghdad, Palestine, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, Bosnia, the concentration camps of Europe and modern-

> day Manhattan [...] [*molora*] is the truth we must all return to, regardless of what faith, race or clan we hail from [6].

5 This useful explication of the significance of the new title is in fact only available in the printed version of the play’s script, based largely on the production’s British premiere at the Barbican Theatre in London in 2008. What Rowland describes as Farber’s dramatic “mission” is evident in the numerous supplementary notes included in the printed volume : Farber’s foreword as director and “mission” ; elaboration on her choice of a Xhosa traditional musical group to represent the Chorus ; notes on the treatment of quotations from the classical source texts ; detailed explication of the mise-en-scène as well as stage directions for the opening scenes of the play, which are absent from the spoken text. The lengthy blocks of italicized director’s notes preceding each scene of action are indicative of Farber’s interest in the historical and political overtones of her adaptation in conjunction with its reception as a tragedy : Klytemnestra, the murderous mother figure in the drama, must be white, while her daughter, the vengeful Elektra, is black [7] and treated as a servant in her mother’s house for her loyalty to her late father, Agamemnon. Elektra’s endurance of Klytemnestra’s abuse and questioning is noted in Farber’s direction as “reminiscent of a political resistance fighter [8]”, as for seventeen years she guards the secret location of her brother Orestes, who is promised to return and restore rightful ownership of the house to the siblings. The character and detail of Farber’s notes here speak to her marked concern that the production begin to cultivate a means of spectatorial recognition of the unfolding drama’s resonance with a South African socio-political context from the outset of the production, despite the initial referential confusion the title may have created.

6 The detailed instructions Farber sets down for the organization of space on and around MOLORA’s stage particularly illustrates her desire that the mise-en-scène facilitate spectators’ recognition of themselves as *receivers* of her dramatic address within the adaptation’s doubled referentiality. Farber’s direction is intended to cultivate a kind of visual and affective recognition within the audience, a recognition not only of the significance of the actions they see performed but also of of their own status *as witnesses* : the spectators

are not allowed to be neutral observers, but are implicated in the events unfolding onstage by virtue of their position as spectators. The positioning of the audience is of particular importance to Farber, here ; she maintains that *MOLORA* should never be set on the traditional proscenium stage – raised and directly opposite an audience – but should always be performed on the floor, level with the audience, who are arranged around the staging area :

> Contact with the audience must be immediate and dynamic, with the audience complicit – experiencing the story as witnesses or participants in the room, rather than as voyeurs excluded from, yet looking in on, the world of the story [9].

7 Indeed, Farber’s staging effectively narrows the space between audience and narrative present time ; within the space for performance, she notes that a low platform where scenes from “the past and memory” will take place should be erected behind the most immediate area of action, in order to be distanced spatially as well as temporally from the audience who are “the community that provides context for this event [10]”.

8 Here, the “event” of which Farber speaks is not limited to the staging of a classical tragedy, nor is it simply a call to witness the unspeakable violence of apartheid ; rather, Farber’s staging expressly invokes the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) hearings that accompanied the nation’s political and social transition to democracy in 1994. Held over the course of two years after the end of apartheid in “drab, simple venues [11]” on which *MOLORA*’s plain setting is modeled, the TRC hearings were expressly *not* juridical in intent. Rather, the hearings sought to “promote national unity and reconciliation in a spirit of understanding which transcends the conflicts and divisions of the past [12]” through a communal and public accounting for the violence that was perpetrated under apartheid. Through conditional offers of amnesty granted for the disclosure, the accounting for human rights violations, and the awarding of reparations, the “truth” that was the nominal basis for national reconciliation was compiled through testimony collected from victims as well as perpetrators of violence during the 1960–1994 apartheid era. Indeed, the physical abuse Elektra suffers at the hands of Klytemnestra is directly drawn from apartheid-era torture, the most

shocking – and recognizable – of which is the « wet bag method », which garnered a macabre notoriety across the world after it was demonstrated live in the publicly broadcast TRC hearings by a former member of the South African Police[13]. *MOLORA*’s version of this scene is intended to be disturbingly historically accurate : Klytemnestra punctuates her interrogation of Elektra with temporary suffocation, placing a plastic bag over her head and pulling tightly while her daughter writhes ; Farber notes that this suffocation “should be performed longer than the audience would be comfortable with[14]”.

9 The discomfort here invoked stems not only from the observation of the performance of the act of violence itself, but from the particular experience of witnessing the re-performance of the violence known to be already past. Beyond a mere representation of the violence perpetrated under apartheid, *MOLORA* here also re-stages the already-deferred experience of witnessing the testimony of violence demanded by the TRC process. Although the audience observing the re-enactment of this torture is a degree removed from the lived experience of suffering, the fact that their presence is necessary for the accounting of this past violence in turn creates the conditions for its own kind of spectatorial suffering : for the South African public, this was the pain of facing the acts of brutal violence perpetrated by or upon their loved ones without their knowledge ; the pain of becoming a witness too late, after-the-fact, and being unable to intervene. By explicitly referencing the testimonial and public elements of the TRC in her staging, Farber takes pains to make her audience appreciate how this adaptation of Aeschylus’s ancient drama resonates with the collective suffering of this specifically post-apartheid experience. In this sense, *MOLORA* challenges its audience to see the tragedy of apartheid specifically as a tragedy of witnessing that has not necessarily ended. Farber’s emphasis upon the present recognizability of the previously invisible tropes of violence that the TRC process brought to light underscores how the wrongs of the past pervade and implicate future generations, years after the initial acts were committed.

Translation and Non-Reciprocation

10 However, while Farber’s contextual « translation » allows the audience to see the points of connection between the events of ancient tragedy and contemporary history, *MOLORA* nonetheless at times seems to purposefully obfuscate the dramatic, narrative, and poetic elements governing recognition of a full and transparent contiguity between the *Oresteia* and South Africa’s transition to democracy. This purposeful obfuscation of meaning appears most prominently in Farber’s use of the figure of inter-lingual translation, so central to the unifying narrative of reconciliation advanced by Bishop Desmond Tutu and the architects of the TRC, as a device for deferring dramatic meaning in the play. In keeping with the staging and narrative framing that explicitly referenced elements of the hearings, Farber ensures that the importance of translation and translators in the production of the original hearings is present in *MOLORA* as well[15]. Among the seven members of the tragic chorus, comprised of singers from the rural Transkei region of South Africa, one man designated as “Translator” also reiterates the English testimony given throughout the play by Klytemnestra and Elektra into Xhosa for the observing choral members, ensuring that they too can comprehend its significance.

11 But while in the context of the TRC, translation was a necessarily mutual action, essential both to the functional process of the hearings as well as to the spirit of overcoming difference in the service of reconciliation, *MOLORA* offers no such reciprocity. The ubiquitous headphones through which the TRC hearings’ audience received their respective translations – which indeed became a symbol for the TRC’s dedication to translation as a figure for understanding in the midst of difference – are notably absent : while the Translator renders the play’s English speech into Xhosa, the audience receives no such reciprocal clarification for the lines in Xhosa uttered not only by the Chorus in their sung odes, but by the characters, Elektra, Orestes, and even Klytemnestra. While the vast majority of the play’s text is in English, the three central players all lapse into Xhosa at times, within monologues as well as portions of dialogue, without qualification or

acknowledgment of the linguistic oscillation that occurs. In one such scene, as the newly reunited siblings, Elektra and Orestes, offer praises to their late father Agamemnon and plot revenge on their murderous mother Klytemnestra, nearly half the dialogue between the two occurs in Xhosa that is left untranslated for non-speakers. Unless a spectator is conversant in both languages, it is only in reading the scripted version of the text (complete with full translations of all Xhosa speech) that he or she can access the full implications of the characters’ speech in conjunction with the action occurring in the scene. In the scene described above, Elektra’s Xhosa lines are peppered with allusions to the linkage of ancestral and national duty, referencing the anguish over the dispossession of civil rights against which the anti-apartheid movement struggled :

> ELEKTRA : (Proudly to her brother.)
> Ntsika yesizwe sethu.
> [to the pillar of the nation]
> The seed of hope through all our weeping.
> Trust your own strength and
> win back again your father’s house[16].

12 Here, Elektra’s Xhosa line references the language of traditional praise song and echoes the claims to rightful nationhood that fueled the anti-apartheid movement. Xhosa becomes not only a means of intensifying the cultural specificity of the adapted South African setting but a key element in evoking some of the particular political resonance in Farber’s staging, as the revenge plot is framed as a restitution of familial wrongs that parallel the national scale of apartheid’s dispossessions. Yet, Farber’s refusal of the reciprocal translation of such lines withholds the full recognition of this resonance from the non-Xhosa speaking spectator. Absent the clarification of translation, these lapses into Xhosa become moments of non-comprehension that may fundamentally alter a non-speaker’s reception of the scene : as the siblings’ reunion turns toward plans for revenge, the enigmatic punctuation of these untranslated lines adds an apprehensive element to the conspiratorial atmosphere, garnering confusion and potentially casting doubt upon the stated motives for what they claim to be a just reprisal against their mother. While the juxtaposition of Xhosa to the standard English dialogue is identifiable as a clear

cultural and even historical referent, the absence of translation leaves that referential meaning unfixed and unguaranteed, open to spectators’ individual interpolation.

13 The usage of Xhosa as a rich but unguaranteed historical and political signifier is further demonstrated in Elektra and Orestes’ reunion scene, in which the crucial moment of recognition between long-lost siblings turns upon a moment of *non*-recognition for an Anglophone spectator. After seventeen years in hiding, Orestes returns to his childhood home under disguise and bearing false news of his death as protection from Klytemnestra, who seeks to absolve herself of the threat of retribution from Agamemnon’s son by making sure of his own death. Under the cover of night, he and Elektra, mourning the death of her brother, separately steal away to seek comfort and counsel at their father’s burial site. When Elektra overhears the newly arrived stranger making traditional libations at Agamemnon’s tomb, premonition of his true identity arises in her, and she calls to him by name :

> ELEKTRA : (*Breathless.*) Orestes ?
>
> He turns to her and they look at each other for a long moment.
>
> ELEKTRA : uOrestes ?
>
> He nods gently [17].

14 It is only after Elektra calls out to her brother as “uOrestes”, addressing him with the Xhosa prefix used to augment proper names, that he dares reveal himself to her, and the joyful reunion can commence ; the referential moment here is indeed fleeting and very possibly overlooked (if even audibly apprehended) by a spectator entirely unfamiliar with Xhosa spoken conventions, the significance vested in the additional phoneme being as likely to be received with mystification as with recognition.

15 Although Farber is careful not to allow any absolutely essential narrative information to escape some kind of clarification in English, an element of incomprehensibility and disorientation nonetheless seems to pervade the performance, as indicated by a number of British reviewers during the production’s time at the London Barbican Theatre in 2008. Reviewer Howard Loxton laments the lost opportunity for communicating narrative development that might

have been presented by the untranslated Xhosa, expressing particular frustration that in the midst of the powerful aural spectacle of the Chorus’s song, the predominantly Anglophone audience had “no way of knowing what comment on or contribution to the argument these villagers are making[18]”. *MOLORA* counter-intuitively calls attention to and yet refuses the significance of translation : in contrast to the efforts of the TRC organizers, for whom inter-lingual translation became a means of figuring and actualizing a vision of diverse solidarity in newly democratic South Africa, Farber withholds the full realization of the act of meaning-making from a monolingual and/or predominantly European audience. Indeed, *MOLORA*’s explicit references to the TRC’s procedures capitalize upon this expectation of translation as a mode of achieving clarity in order to emphasize the dramatic effect of its refusal. Here, while the audience recognize that they are being addressed by the Chorus, the play withholds key elements which would make the full transmission of meaning complete. By refusing the very vehicle which the TRC upheld as the means of achieving commonality across difference, Farber troubles the process by which an audience might expect dramatic or historical meaning to be communicated in the play.

16 Beyond the deferral of linguistic meaning that *MOLORA* enacts in performance, Farber’s paradoxical non-use of translation also impedes a spectator’s attempts to make meaning at the level of dramatic narrative. While, for the most part, Farber’s use of the visual and aural spectacle of African traditional ritual was received by reviewers as one of the most singular and striking of her directorial choices, the distancing effect of the untranslated Xhosa was rarely left unremarked. Another British reviewer, after characterizing the cast’s performance as “electrifying and evocative”, nonetheless finds the presence of the “unintelligible” non-English “dialect” as a problem of translation in another sense, charging that it “diminishes the choral qualities of reflection and explanation of events and does not do justice to Aeschylus’ handling of this device[19]”. Farber’s choice to leave all of *MOLORA*’s choral sections untranslated indeed pushes against the conventional use of the tragic chorus as a tool of narrative synthesis and as sounding board guiding spectatorial reflection. Yet, this alienating effect is not without some intent on Farber’s part ; an introductory note in the printed text explains her desire to “reinvent”

the Chorus for a contemporary audience through the music of the Ngqoko Cultural Group, a collective of men and women from the Transkei region of South Africa whose work with traditional instruments and unique style of split-tone singing evokes a “haunting texture of sound, which is unfamiliar to most modern ears”. Through the relatively estranged character of this “rural Xhosa aesthetic”, Farber indeed seeks to recapture some of what she sees as the original power of the dramatic device in representing the “weight and conscience of the community [20]”. In this sense, the dramatic role of *MOLORA*’s chorus is located less in the signifying content of its verses than in the spectators’ recognition of the alienating qualities of its form, an alterity that is perhaps intensified by the “ordinary [21]” appearance of its performers, who are not professionals but rural residents of the Transkei. As the effect of the traditional music is compounded by the untranslated sung text of the choral odes, Farber’s use of the chorus as a tool of estrangement pushes her spectators away from a coherent sense of cross-cultural, cross-linguistic meaning that refuses some of the clichés of the so-called universal, cross-temporal meaning that is often invoked in classical and dramatic adaptation.

17 Indeed, Farber’s use of the concept of linguistic translation (and/or its absence) as a vehicle for dislocating meaning within the play finds a further analogue in her unprecedented approach in adapting the original Greek tragic texts. The full implications of the “radical” mode in which Farber adapts the classical tragedy is indeed not limited to the historical-political referentiality of what I have called the “doubled” character of her adaptation but further extends to her treatment of the classical source material at the textual level. Interestingly, despite Farber’s purported “radicality”, the printed text of *MOLORA* indeed reads as a meticulous record of citations : throughout the script, spoken lines are footnoted to indicate what classical texts they are sourced from. These inter-linear notes reveal that Farber has not only drawn from the Aeschylean trilogy most commonly associated with the House of Atreus myth but also from Euripides’ and Sophocles’ own renderings of the narrative, *Elektra* and *Orestes*, respectively, as well as Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis*, which precedes the main temporal action of the trilogy and details Agamemnon’s ritual killing of Iphigenia (sister of Elektra and Orestes)

that Klytemnestra will cite as the justification for his death [22]. Farber’s inclusion of dramatic sources beyond the canonical Aeschylean presentation of the myth allows her to present a more complex portrayal of the mythic events than Aeschylus’ trilogy alone provides ; Euripides’ influences are particularly evident in the expanded autonomy and vocal contributions of Elektra (in Aeschylus’ version, her character is vastly overshadowed by Orestes), as well as the ambivalent and even humanizing treatment of Klytemnestra, whose contradictory relation toward her children and even murdered husband [23], complicates the portrait of the matriarch as cold, ambitious, and one-dimensionally cruel. Thus, the assumed cohesive mythical basis upon which *MOLORA* was built appears rather as a multiplicity of narratives woven from the combination of dramatic interpretations of the Oresteia myth. This not only emphasizes the disputed question of how to define justice in this already ethically complicated drama of intimate violence but does so through the disruption of the stable referential ground upon which the spectator would conventionally expect to recognize the production as an adaptation of a single, authoritative dramatic text.

18 Indeed, while *MOLORA* purports to be an adaptation with a doubled referent, its text in performance disrupts the conventions of referential coherence that might allow the significance of the adaptations fully to transmit to the audience. Beyond even calling into question the singularity of the tragic source text, Farber’s adaptation further rejects the possibility of a unified narrative referent, as her text incorporates further citations beyond either the classical Greek or contemporary African bases for her adaptations : early in the play, while Klytemnestra violently interrogates her daughter for information about Orestes’ location, she quotes – without attribution or clarification – from the infamous “curse of Ham” passage of the Book of Genesis [24]. Later, in an apparent reversal of roles, Elektra holds her mother captive ; poised on the edge of revenge, her words also slipping into citation by way of Shakespeare’s Shylock :

> If you prick us—do we not bleed ?
> If you tickle us—do we not laugh ?
> If you poison us—do we not die ?
> And if you wrong us…
> Shall we not revenge [25] ?

19 These moments of unexpected intertextuality further complicate the spectator’s understanding of the moral universe established in *MOLORA*, whose boundaries are now supplemented by the voices of multiple and competing textual authorities beyond antiquity. While these referential gestures could be read as an attempt to universalize the primary intertext of South Africa’s recent history, the play challenges the ethical clarity that might be expected to accompany such a universalization : as these post-classical citations arise in moments when distinctions between victims and perpetrators of violence blur and even reverse, the significance that a spectator might attempt to draw from any single occasion of intertextuality is all the more in question.

20 As the action of the drama progresses, the play shifts outward from the sphere of referentiality originally promised to its audiences, forestalling the transparent comprehensibility that might allow a spectator some relative mastery over the drama in performance. Rather, the educated, informed spectator who might recognize where the text veers from Aeschylus’ plots, as well as even the biblical and Shakespearean references, is perhaps no better served here than the spectator for whom the significance of these extra-textual citations does *not* fully transmit. The ability to identify the range of citations at work in *MOLORA* in fact draws out the play’s lack of single, governing referent : their demand to be taken into account by the spectator within the time of performance in fact contributes to the dramatic sleight of hand that Farber enacts within the dramatic timeline of the *Oresteia*, deferring the recognition of her most radical revision to the play.

Spectatorial Amnesia as Collective Reimagination

21 Farber’s adaptation does seek to cultivate a degree of referential recognition in its audience, but it is a recognition whose affective and dramatic force is felt less in the signification it brings to the intended object of transmission than in the alienation and incomprehensibility that arises in its withholding and deferral throughout the play. Through this unsettling of references and coherent points of contact between adaptation and its object(s), Farber orchestrates a kind of

spectatorial amnesia over the course of *MOLORA* : by playing with and against the audience’s familiarity with the conventions of tragic drama and recent South African political history, *MOLORA* at once sets up and disavows the conventions of genre, narrative, and national narrative that shape the adaptation. In the process of defamiliarization that follows, the spectator is temporarily freed from the faculty of judgment by verisimilitude that might otherwise dominate the piece’s success in terms of its recognizability as adaptation of both history and ancient myth. In the midst of this referential dislocation, the spectator is distanced from the play’s purported source texts – dramatic and historical both – and the expectations and predetermined ends that they imply : instead, the audience is encouraged to take seriously the imaginative and social implications of Farber’s revisions independently of and perhaps in contrast to the play’s historical and written sources.

22 This is nowhere more apparent than in the closing scenes of the play ; in what is manifestly the most radical of Farber’s alterations to the original narrative, Orestes, in the final scene, breaks from the role laid out for him and refuses to kill his mother Klytemnestra. A shocked Elektra rebuffs her brother for so wilfully reneging upon the debt laid out for them by the memory of their murdered father : despite the seventeen years that have passed, she asserts that “only a fool would forget a father’s debt”, as has been her mantra throughout the play [26]. Indeed, for Elektra, the past has an inexorable authority upon the present and future available to her. Forgetting the wrongs of the past would be a wrong in its own right, as set out by powers beyond them, not only by the customary blood-debt owed to their murdered father but also by the ancient orchestrators of their narrative, who have assured that “this night’s end is already written [27]”.

23 Yet, when Orestes begs his sister to join him and “rewrite this ancient end [28]” laid out for them, they exchange a tragic referent for a historical one : in refusing the retributive justice that meets violence with violence, they themselves create the conditions for the testimonial process of adjudication and reparative justice analogous to the South African Truth Commission, forming the basis for the temporal frame through which the drama of *MOLORA* unfolds. When a desperate Elektra rejects her brother’s proposed amnesty and

attempts to salvage the ending laid out by Aeschylus’ tragedy, the Chorus actively intervenes : breaking from their conventional position of non-participatory commentary on the dramatic action, the seven figures enter the forbidden memory-space of the stage and physically restrain the young woman from her attempt on her mother’s life. Beginning a collective prayer and their final ode, the Chorus’s song returns the audience from the memorial content time of the past, back *and* forward, to the outer frame narrative from which the play began. As the Chorus ceremonially awards amnesty to both Klytemnestra *and* Elektra, the players return to the present time of testimony : the drab room where mother and daughter face each other across a plain wooden table, bare but for the microphones into which they begin to give their accounts of the wrongs of the past, which served as the premise for the reenacted memories that made up the bulk of the action of the play. It is only now, at this point in the performance, that one can fully recognize that this unexpected amnesty, the most radical of Farber’s revisions to the original tragedy, has in fact been intimated from the outset of the performance : the play’s unprecedented end is prefigured by Klytemnestra’s presence in the first scene’s the testimonial frame device, the ultimate significance of which is subsequently effaced in the linguistic and referential confusion the drama weaves. While the power of Farber’s adaptation is in part linked to the spectator’s memory, as cognitive basis for the knowledge and expectations of the historical and dramatic referents, the effect created by MOLORA’s staging is in fact anti-memorial : Farber’s use of the testimonial structure as a device for representing the past paradoxically resists the conservative impetus of memorialization, the desire to set down the events of the past as absolute and authoritative. Rather, MOLORA’s testimony is here anti-memorial in that it reconstructs the past not to preserve or reify its events with absolute authority. Instead, it uses the act of narrative accounting as the critical means of negating such a past’s authority over the future : not by an act of forgetting as absolute erasure, but by the temporary and productive amnesia that allows the possibility of thinking a future beyond what is written and known.

24 To this end, in its dramatic rewriting of the original tragic narrative, MOLORA performs something of the ambivalence associated with the amnesty that the TRC hearings offered as a means of reckoning with

the decades of violence perpetrated under the auspices of the apartheid regime. Indeed, the transitional government’s pursuit of both amnesty and reparation concurrently – perhaps more specifically, amnesty in the service of reparation [29], seemed impossible or insufficient to many in the wake of apartheid, those who likely echoed Elektra’s pressing question : “how could I forget ? How can we move on until the debt is paid [30] ?” How can one rebuild a nation alongside the perpetrators of unforgettable violence against oneself and one’s fellow citizens ? In that sense, the temporary spectatorial amnesia that *MOLORA* enacts—despite and across its referential basis—demonstrates the potential for dramatic adaptation to work as a device of imaginative amnesty. Indeed, “amnesty”, in its juridical as well as etymological [31] sense, is not reducible to uncritical forgetting, a pure erasure of that which came before ; rather, it marks a conscious choice to “not return”, a choice that is conditioned by and despite memory, in conjunction with the deliberative action at work in perception and recognition.

25 *MOLORA*, through the dramatic amnesia it effects in performance, demonstrates something of the generative, reparative potential that the collective choice to not-return might afford as a collective project, between the absence of memory and the injunction to memorialization evoked by the vengeful Elektra’s initial command to the audience “carve” these words “into your heart [32]”. Rather than enjoining its witnesses to inscribe an absolute significance of the text and the tragic memory it attests to into their hearts – in the vein of the imperative “never forget” that often functions as an injunction to revenge or the reiteration of violence [33], *MOLORA* speaks not to the spectator who attempts to master its multiplied signification but to the witness who is dislocated and disoriented by it, indeed, who allows themselves to be moved by it. Despite and because of the web of referentiality through which it addresses itself to its spectators, *MOLORA*’s translation of tragedy and history creates a dislocated dramatic present in its performance, a present in which, in the words of Klytemnestra, “nothing is written [34]”, and yet from the ash that is left “after the storytelling is done [35]”, the conditions of possibility for an unprecedented, as yet unthinkable future might arise.

1 Yaël Farber, *Plays One* [pref. Ingrid Rowland], London, Oberon Books Ltd, 2015, p. 83.

2 *Ibid.*, p. vii.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 37.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, South African Department of Justice, 2005, « Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995 », http://www.justice.gov.za/legislation/acts/1995-034.pdf.

13 Yaël Farber, *Plays One*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

14 *Ibid.*

15 To ensure maximum access to the testimonies, considering the linguistic diversity of the South African population, a bevy of translators was present at each hearing, providing instantaneous translations into the nation’s eleven official languages.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

18 Howard Loxton, « Molora », 2008, https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/molora-rev.

19 Jason Millar, « Theatre Review: MOLORA », 4 April 2008, https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/molora-rev.

20 Yaël Farber, *Plays One*, *op. cit.*, p. 17. Although Farber does not specify her basis for her claim about the original role of the chorus, her statement is largely supported by Vernant and Vidal-Naquet’s assessment of the fifth

century reception of the device; see Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, New York, Zone Books, 1988, p. 34.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

22 Farber seems to draw material from only two of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy, *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*, leaving aside the final play (*The Eumenides*), which represents the trial and acquittal of Orestes for his mother’s murder.

23 Farber notably includes a portion of Klytemnestra’s *pathos*-inducing soliloquy narrating the violent history of her marriage to Agamemnon, which is otherwise absent from Aeschylus’ version of the narrative. While the source is marked « unknown », it is corroborated by a similar passage of *Iphigenia at Aulis*. *Ibid.*, p. 48.

24 As Farber notes, this passage (Genesis 9: 20-27), which details the origin of the “dark descendants” of biblical man, was used during apartheid (and elsewhere) by the white majority to justify the enslavement and differential treatment of non-white peoples. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 73, *The Merchant of Venice*, III, i, 49-61.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

29 Truth and Reconciliation Commission, « Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995 », *op. cit.*

30 Yaël Farber, *Plays One*, *op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.

31 From ancient Greek, *amnestia*, literally « not returning ».

32 Yaël Farber, *Plays One*, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

33 A contemporary instance of which, the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Farber references in her foreword. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

English

Receptions of MOLORA, Yaël Farber’s dramatic reimagining of the Oresteia myth during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, have praised the play’s use of its tragic and historical bases for adaptation to transform spectatorial experience into a site of dramatic witnessing, as the conventions of ancient tragedy resonate with recent South African history. Yet, despite its recognizable double referents, MOLORA is marked too by its use of techniques of linguistic sense-making to obfuscate recognition, as Farber uses translation and intertextual citation as devices for denying full comprehension of the referential play at work in both its mytho-tragic and historical-juridical domains. Through an examination of the play as an adaptation and translation of both myth and recent history, this paper interrogates the aesthetic conditions of possibility for achieving justice through narrative testimony that the TRC set forth in its exceptional structure. Indeed, through techniques of non- and partial translation that produce a paradoxical experience of “dramatic amnesia” within its familiar formal and narrative frames, MOLORA fosters a particular anti-memorial relation to its adapted content, one whose performance nonetheless demonstrates the possibility of unprecedented socio-political imaginaries within and despite the ambivalent amnesty of the TRC.

Français

MOLORA de Yaël Farber, une adaptation dramatique du mythe de l’Orestie prenant place durant les auditions de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation, a été louée pour la manière dont elle combine le tragique et l’historique afin de transformer l’expérience du spectateur en une occasion de témoigner des événements de l’histoire récente de l’Afrique du Sud. Cependant, et bien que ses références historiques soient particulièrement reconnaissables, MOLORA est aussi remarquable par son utilisation des techniques linguistiques qui viennent brouiller la reconnaissance des spectateurs puisque Farber emploie la traduction et la citation intertextuelle afin d’empêcher la compréhension complète du jeu référentiel des sphères à la fois mytho-tragiques et historico-juridiques. En analysant cette pièce de théâtre en tant qu’adaptation et traduction à la fois d’un mythe et de l’histoire récente, cet article examine les conditions de possibilité requises pour accéder à la justice par le biais du témoignage narratif — un processus central au mode opératoire de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation sud-africaine. En effet, MOLORA produit un lien « anticommémoratif » entre son action performative et ses référents apparents, grâce à l’emploi de techniques de non-traduction et de traduction partielle qui produisent une expérience paradoxale « d’amnésie dramatique » au sein de contextes narratifs familiers. Ce type de représentation démontre la possibilité de conceptualiser des imaginaires sociaux et politiques inattendus malgré l’amnistie problématique accordée par la Commission de vérité et réconciliation.

Mots-clés
tragédie grecque, réconciliation, apartheid, adaptation dramatique, traduction, audience, témoignage

Keywords
Greek tragic theater, reconciliation, apartheid, dramatic adaptation, translation, audience, testimony

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