

“Rewrite this ancient end!” The *Oresteia* in post-TRC South Africa

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Introduction

Though based on the myth of the house of Atreus and set in the aftermath of the Trojan War, Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* trilogy held great contemporary relevance when it was first performed at the Dionysia festival in Athens in 458 BC. The trilogy marks the transition that Athens was undergoing as it changed from a tribal culture ruled by customary law into a democratic society governed by constitutional law (Ziolkowski, 1977: 20). The first two parts dramatise the Homeric understanding of justice, in which justice is equated with vengeance. In *Agamemnon*, the king of Argos returns from Troy and is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra in revenge for the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia. In the *Libation Bearers*, their children Electra and Orestes avenge Agamemnon’s death by killing Clytemnestra. The trilogy’s final part, the *Euminides*—in which Athena establishes a judicial court so that Orestes can be tried for matricide—stages the transformation of justice as vengeance into the legal justice of Athens’ new democracy.¹

¹ At his trial, Orestes is defended by Apollo, who commanded the killing, and accused by the Furies, who demand vengeance for the blood-crime he has committed. When the judges are unable to decide on Orestes’ fate, Athena casts the final vote herself and Orestes is granted amnesty. Though the scope of this paper does not permit me to discuss its implications, it is interesting that Athena’s vote is primarily based on the argument that a father’s death outweighs a mother’s.

In this paper, I will discuss two dramatic texts that draw on the Oresteia within another context of transitional justice, that of post-apartheid South Africa. The first is Mark Fleishman's *In the City of Paradise*, which premiered at the University of Cape Town in 1998 as a collaborative production with his drama students, who also formed the cast. The second is Yael Farber's *MoLoRa* (Sesotho for "ash"), first performed in Germany in 2004 and currently touring other parts of the world.² In both plays, the distorted family relations within the house of Atreus, a house cursed by revenge, come to represent the distorted relations within South Africa, a nation that was haunted by a similar cycle of vengeance. Through recourse to the Oresteia—which, in Farber's words, "unflinchingly articulates the spirals of violence unleashed in the pursuit of righteous bloodshed"—both playwrights dramatise the challenges that South Africa faced after the end of apartheid: how to get beyond vengeance, how to reconcile a nation torn apart by decades of injustice and how to change from a system of apartheid to a non-racial democracy.

Staging transition

In their reworkings, both Fleishman and Farber make explicit reference to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), an institution established in 1995 to avoid the bloodshed that everybody expected after apartheid officially ended and, instead, find ways to together move forward within a new democratic South Africa. The TRC was the result of negotiations that culminated in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act, which recognised "a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for ubuntu but not for victimization."³ The work of the TRC was divided into three

² Both plays are (yet) unpublished. I wish to thank Mark Fleishman and Yael Farber for making the unpublished scripts available to me.

³ See http://www.fas.org/irp/world/rsa/act95_034.htm. The term "ubuntu" is a Nguni word referring to "humaneness". Wilson discusses how in the TRC

committees. The Human Rights Violations Committee investigated the human rights violations that occurred between 1960 and 1994 and organised hearings in which victims and perpetrators could publicly tell their stories and bring out in the open that what had remained hidden. The Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee was charged with restoring victims' dignity and formulating proposals with regards to rehabilitation. Finally, the Amnesty Committee considered applications for amnesty in accordance with the provisions of the 1995 Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act.

Fleishman and Farber both draw on Aeschylus' *Oresteia* from a particular "post-TRC" perspective. Farber's focus is on the confrontation between Klytemnestra and Elektra. The entire action of *MoLoRa* is enclosed within the framework of a TRC hearing, where Elektra has come to hear the testimony of her mother Klytemnestra—the only white character in the play—who she witnessed brutally murdering her father Agamemnon when she was a child. Through the confrontation between mother and daughter, perpetrator and victim, Farber portrays the brutal human rights violations that the various TRC hearings brought to light.

In her stage descriptions, she instructs that the action should be set in "a bare hall or room—much like the drab and simple venues in which most of the testimonies were heard during the course of South Africa's 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'" (2). Klytemnestra and Elektra sit behind two tables with microphones. In between the tables stands a raised stage on which the story will be enacted. The chorus of women—Xhosa singers from the Nqoko Cultural Group—sit to the back of the performance area and the audience is located at the front. Through these seating arrangements, chorus and

process the language of reconciliation became synonymous with the term "ubuntu" (Wilson, 2001: 9-13).

audience are incorporated as witnesses to the hearing. The actors face the audience when they speak.

During their testimonies, Elektra and Klytemnestra step onto the raised stage, into the performance space, to re-enact fragments from the past. This use of the metatheatrical device of the play-within-the-play points to the theatrical nature of the TRC hearings, hearings that, as Catherine M. Cole observes, were highly performative events in terms of their “theatrical and dramatic emotional displays, improvisational story-telling, singing, weeping, and ritualistic lighting of candles” (2007: 167, 174). The hearings were held on raised platforms in churches, town halls and community centres throughout the country, which “the TRC toured like a travelling road show” (Cole , 2007: 172). They staged confrontations between victims and perpetrators in front of an audience that reached far beyond those present in the various venues, since not only were proceedings published within the papers, but many hearings could be witnessed live on radio and television. Victims and perpetrators, then, were heard by the nation at large. Cole explains that it was largely because of their performative nature that the TRC’s live hearings were so “affective, and consequently, they were effective in facilitating, however imperfectly, a transition from a racist, totalitarian state to a non-racial democracy” (179). Richard A. Wilson is less optimistic and questions their actual effect on the nation at large. Based on research on the TRC’s impact on the African townships of the Vaal region to the North of Johannesburg, he argues that “for all their media coverage, TRC hearings were often little more than a symbolic and ritualized performance with a weak impact on vengeance in urban townships” (2001: 227).

Farber’s and Fleishman’s plays not only point to the performative nature of the TRC hearings, but also to the role of narrative within these hearings. As its name implies, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was intended to achieve reconciliation by uncovering the truth about the past and thus

constructing a shared memory. From a post-structuralist perspective, as Rosemary Jane Jolly notes, such an appeal to a “shared memory” and to “truth” may be understood to assume the naïve wish to legitimate a single master narrative and impose an official history (Jolly, 2001: 701). However, Jolly finds that the terms “shared memory” and “truth” should not be understood as some monolithic version of the past, but as a heterogeneous construction open to continuous debate. This is primarily the case, she argues, because the TRC composed its narrative out of a wide range of stories by victims and perpetrators who were allowed to tell their story in their own words, rather than being interrogated by committee members. According to Jolly, this story-telling aspect meant that the TRC ritualised “that which can be counted on to resist closure—narrative”, and

The very excess of this ritual—that is, its surplus of meaning beyond the mechanics of secular and legal concepts of violation, testimony, proof, confession, judgement, punishment, financial compensation, even the truths the commission itself seeks to verify—serves its mandate of contributing substantially to the creation of South Africa’s new democracy. (Jolly 2001: 709-710)⁴

In Farber and Fleishman this storytelling aspect is dramatised in the characters’ insistence on telling their stories, in conveying their subjective truths as they choose to. A good

⁴ Of course, the narrative about the nation’s trauma inevitably remains fractured. Anthony Holiday states, for example, that since the TRC restricted itself to the human rights violations that were committed between 1 March 1960 and 5 December 1993, the mass violence that occurred in the transition period afterwards has not been adequately dealt with (in Coetzee and Nutall, 1998: 46). Not only has only a small section of the truth been uncovered, it is also important to recognise that the past that the TRC, constructed was, as Brent Harris says, constructed discursively. The possible implications of this is illustrated by Harris’s reference to a hearing in 1996, when Teddy Williams recounted the sexual abuse of female recruits by ANC camp commanders in Angola but was asked to “confine yourself to the things that have happened to you and what you did” (Harris, 2000: 129).

example from Fleishman is when Clytemnestra uses the form of a fairy tale to tell Orestes about Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, starting with "Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there lived a weak and wicked king" (28). In Farber, Elektra confronts Klytemnestra with the power she now holds as the one who is free to speak, as the one who can determine and control what is told: "With which of your evils shall I begin my recital?", she says, "With which shall I end it?"(5). Because of course, stories do end and, giving her play wider relevance than the particular context of South Africa, Farber explains how the "ash" of the title MoLoRa refers to this finitude:

Our story begins with Orestes returning home with a tin full of ash. It is the state from which we all come, and—from the concentration camps of Europe; the ruins of Baghdad, Palestine, Northern Ireland and Rwanda...to the ash around the fire after the storytelling is done...it is a state to which we must all humbly return. (Director's note, unpublished)

Breaking the cycle of revenge

In Farber's MoLoRa, performative and narrative devices together construct a story that metaphorically represents how, as Farber says, "like Elektra, countless South Africans came to live as 'servants in the Halls of their Father's house'" (director's note). The audience hears Elektra testify about the torture she suffered by the hands of her mother, for example with the "Wet Bag Method", used by South African security police to torture political activists and graphically demonstrated at TRC hearings (25).⁵ They even see the torture performed when Klytemnestra stuffs a cloth into her mouth and burns her with cigarettes. Clearly the audience is to understand Elektra as a victim of apartheid. During the

⁵ The wet bag method consisted of tying a man down and placing a wet bag over his face to suffocate him. See, of example, the 2006 amnesty report "South Africa, Briefing for the Committee Against Torture: www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cat/docs/ngos/AI-SouthAfrica.pdf

interrogation—which, so the stage descriptions instruct, Elektra endures like a political resistance fighter—Klytemnestra quotes from Genesis the curse that Ham's father Noah places upon Ham's son Canaan: "Cursed be your children. The servants of servants shall they be unto their brethren" (Farber 11-12; Gen. 9:25). Ellen van Wolde discusses how this episode was often used as a biblical legitimization of apartheid theology, understanding the Africans as the descendents of Ham and, therefore, a people destined to be a servant-people (Van Wolde 2001: 13-14). Seeing the suffering Elektra has had to endure enacted on stage, the audience is led to understand why Elektra would feel that "if the guilty pay not with blood for blood—then we are nothing but a history without a future" (6).

For Fleishman's Electra the future similarly demands revenge. She too is scarred by years of abuse and imprisonment; she too believes that "only violence can save us" (19). Even Orestes, who desperately tries to convince his sister of the need to break the cycle of revenge, is eventually driven to kill, first Aegisthus and then his own mother Clytemnestra. Both playwrights show that violence begets violence and dramatise Nietzsche's warning that "Whoever fights monsters should take care that in the process he does not become a monster" (Nietzsche, 1966: 98).

Farber's Klytemnestra knows this danger well; she knows it from her own experience and therefore urges her children that "Nothing—nothing is written./ Do not choose to be me. The hounds that avenge all murder will forever hunt you down" (55). But her warning seems in vain, for in what is arguably the most tragic moment of the play, Orestes faces his mother, ready to strike her, crying in rage and pain: "YOU HAVE MADE ME WHAT I AM!" (56). His outcry articulates one of the main difficulties that arose in the confrontations that the TRC hearings staged, because as Jeremy Sarkin explains, the distinction between perpetrator and victim was often blurred and some people were both perpetrator and victim at

the same time (82). Fleishman and Farber underline this difficulty, most effectively perhaps in their portrayal of Clytemnestra/Klytemnestra as both an abuser and a victim of abuse. In Fleishman, she talks about the loss of her daughter Iphigenia and about the shame she felt when Agamemnon—portrayed here not as a noble king torn but as a brutish tyrant—brought his concubine Cassandra into her house. In Farber, she tells Elektra how she first met Agamemnon “the day he opened up my first husband and ripped out his guts. He tore this—my first born from my breast. Then holding the child by its new ankles—he smashed its tiny head against a rock. Then took me for his wife” (22).⁶ Clytemnestra/Klytemnestra has her own stories to tell.

In Fleishman’s tragedy, like Aeschylus’, Orestes and Elektra murder Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, but Farber’s story has a different outcome. Already early on in the play, despite the many accusations and shouts of hatred, some hope for reconciliation is expressed when Elektra and Klytemnestra both attempt to see each other’s humanity. It is significant, for example, that despite her deep feelings of revenge, Elektra acknowledges her mother’s hurt: “I see your heart mama./ I know it hurts” (19). And that Klytemnestra, though hesitantly and quite euphemistically, does express some remorse “I am not so exceedingly glad at the deeds I have done...” (20). Aegisthus (here Ayesthus, represented by an enormous worker’s uniform hanging on a washing line) is killed, but when Orestes is ready to murder Klytemnestra, the chorus’ singing makes him change his mind, after which he urges Elektra to “walk away. Rewrite this ancient end!” (57)⁷ When Elektra, not ready to let go of her vengeance, grabs the axe and

⁶ In Aeschylus, this painful episode in Clytemnestra’s personal history remains unmentioned and unacknowledged.

⁷ The chorus is played by members of the Ngqoko Cultural Group, a group of Xhosa women who sing in split tone and use ancient musical instruments (Farber, Director’s note).

runs at Klytemnestra, the chorus overpower her and comfort her as she weeps. The ancient end has been rewritten, because unlike in Aeschylus (and unlike in Fleishman's reworking of Aeschylus) Farber's Klytemnestra lives. Also, South Africa's (his)story of vengeance is rewritten, though residues of vengeance remain:

It falls softly the residue of revenge...like rain.
And we who made the sons and daughters of this
Land...Servants in the halls of their forefathers..
We know.
We are still only here by grace alone.
Look now—dawn is coming.
Great chains on the home are falling off.
This house rises up.
For too long it has lain in ash on the ground. (59)

There is no family resolve, no love can be regained here, no forgiveness can be articulated, but the fact that the children help their mother to her feet and let her walk away signals the beginning of the process of forgiveness, a difficult process because, as Farber writes, "notions of a Rainbow Nation gliding effortlessly into forgiveness are absurd" (Director's note). Farber has her reasons for making the chorus the main agents in breaking the cycle of revenge and starting the process of forgiveness, because according to her: "it was not the gods or deus ex machina that delivered us from ourselves in the years following democracy," Farber writes, "but the common everyman and woman like Cynthia Ngwenyu who lit the way for us all" (Director's note).

Of forgiveness and amnesty

Within the context of the TRC, the concept of forgiveness, which Farber refers to here, deserves some closer attention. In its most basic sense, forgiveness is the opposite response to violence from revenge. It is therefore interesting that, though both Fleishman and Farber end their plays on an optimistic note, where revenge gives way to new beginnings, none of their characters explicitly articulate forgiveness. This is

especially striking since forgiveness, in itself a very personal and moral concept, came to occupy such a prominent position within the TRC's political rhetoric of reconciliation. Indeed, the TRC hearings were structured in such a way that

any expression of a desire for revenge would seem out of place. Virtues of forgiveness and reconciliation were so loudly and roundly applauded that emotions of revenge, hatred and bitterness were rendered unacceptable, an ugly intrusion on a peaceful, healing process. (Wilson 2001: 17)

It was largely because of the influence of Church leaders, in particular the chairman of the commission, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that legal rhetoric became obscured with Christian understandings of forgiveness.

Though forgiveness was important within the language of the TRC, the amnesty arrangement—often understood as its institutionalisation and collectivisation—was never directly linked to forgiveness, but to truth. Despite Tutu's emphasis on forgiveness (evident in the title of his memoir *No Future Without Forgiveness* (1999)), it was truth that would pave the way towards future reconciliation. Not only was the TRC the first truth commission to be given the mandate to grant amnesty to perpetrators, freeing them from civil and criminal prosecution for the rest of their lives, but it was also the first commission that linked amnesty to the uncovering of the truth (Cole, 2007: 174). Amnesty usually suggests collective forgetting of past wrongs and the wish to break clean from the past—indeed in ancient Greek 'amnesty' and amnesia are two meanings of same word. In the TRC, however, "amnesty was associated with 'anamnesis rather than amnesia' (as quoted in Schaap, 2005: 113). Accordingly, applicants for amnesty were not asked to publicly apologise, express remorse and ask for forgiveness, but solely to state their crimes.

Michael Janover may be right that though amnesty could not amount to a collective act of forgiveness, the process

of amnesty did appear to be sustained, at least in part, by wanting to forgive (2007: 115). Still, to refer to forgiveness within the context of political reconciliation is inevitably flawed, because it translocates an essentially a moral and personal discourse to the political realm. The essence of forgiveness, after all, is that one can only forgive on behalf of oneself, not somebody else, let alone groups of people. According to Derrida, “forgiveness does not, it should never amount to a therapy of reconciliation” (41), because this implies the intervention of a third party within what should essentially be a one-to-one relationship between victim and perpetrator. Within the context of the TRC the inevitable contamination that such interference can have on the concept of forgiveness is clear, for example, from the complaint of some victims who had felt expected, and therefore forced, to forgive their perpetrators.⁸ It exemplifies the tension between what Derrida describes as an “unconditional forgiveness” and a “conditional forgiveness proportionate to the recognition of the fault” (34-35). Janover finds Derrida’s idea of pure forgiveness as exceeding such “instrumentalism of politics and ethics, [is] charming and persuasive” in a world “in which forgiveness can be traded and reduced to a mechanism for winning votes or allies a world in which amnesty for former mass murderers and tyrants can be decided by political ideals” (2007: 228). On the other hand, even when forgiveness is released from such political instrumentalism and taken back into the personal and moral realm, it seems difficult to conceive of it as unconditional, for forgiveness is always informed by a complex mixture of personal, social and

⁸ See the report on survivors’ perceptions of the TRC by the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation between 7 August 1997 and 1 February 1998: www.csvr.org.za/papers/papkhul.htm. The victims’ complaint also points to (the failure of) what Derrida describes as another mediating institution: language, which mediates in the sense that it states forgiveness in order to bring about the act of forgiveness itself (see Derrida, 2001: 42).

political factors and therefore never remains secluded in the one-to-one relationship of perpetrator and victim.

Though many felt that the TRC's amnesty arrangement was the only way to move on towards a democratic future, it has nonetheless been widely debated; a debate that Fleishman dramatises in the final scene of his play. Where Farber's entire play is framed as a TRC hearing, in Fleishman the reference to the TRC only comes at the end, when the question is posed whether Orestes and Electra should be convicted for their matricide, or granted amnesty instead. Among the furies in gas masks that begin to hound them are Tyndareus and Leda, Clytemnestra's parents, two characters that do not figure in Aeschylus. Fleishman introduces another generation involved in and affected by the violence. In Euripides' *Orestes*, where Tyndareus does play a prominent role, he threatens to encourage the citizens of Argos to stone Orestes to death. In Fleishman, however, despite his grief and anger about his daughter's death, he stops the mob from stoning Orestes and Electra, persuading them that "we seek not private vengeance here, but public retribution./ Justice will win out./ Our time will come" (37). He urges to replace vengeance with legal action, but his call is not answered. Instead, the court herald announces:

...we stand today upon an historic bridge
between a past of deep division and discord,
and a brighter future of peace and prosperity for all.
There is a need for understanding, not for vengeance,
For forgiveness not retaliation,
For humanity not for victimization.
Our learned judges, seek to reconcile all differences,
To set aside all enmity and hatred,
To build anew our fragile lives in Argos.
They decree, therefore, that amnesty shall be granted
In respect of acts, omissions and offences
Committed in the cause of conflicts of the past,

Where a full disclosure of the facts are made,
Lest we forget our brutal heritage. (38)

The lines that the herald speaks are almost identical to those of the 1995 Truth and Reconciliation Act. Indeed, the final image of the play suggests a “brighter future of peace and prosperity for all”, with the mob who were about to stone Electra and Orestes now holding them above the ground in triumphant adoration. Despite Tyndareus’ outrage at the decision to grant amnesty to his daughter’s murderers, the final image presents the TRC’s amnesty arrangement as an imperfect, but necessary tool for democracy.

In the rhetoric of the TRC, amnesty was repeatedly linked to a notion of transitional or restorative justice. When asked to defend the amnesty provisions, Desmond Tutu, for example, argued that the notion of a retributive justice is largely Western and that: “The African understanding is far more restorative, not so much to punish as to redress or restore a balance that has been knocked askew” (quoted in Minow 1998: 81). However, Tyndareus’ objections—that “this amnesty pollutes our law” and that it is a “travesty of justice”—reflect those of many victims of apartheid who felt that the amnesty provisions denied them the right to seek judicial redress (39). Family members of the murdered anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, for example, together with other survivors of murdered activists, filed a lawsuit against the TRC, claiming that the amnesty arrangement was unconstitutional. The Constitutional Court rejected the claim and ruled that amnesty in exchange for truth did not violate the constitution, nor the Geneva Convention (Minow, 1998: 56).

Conclusion

The lawsuit of the Biko family and the debate about the TRC’s amnesty arrangement well illustrate the inevitable clash in post-conflict societies between different understandings and different demands of justice, differences that are difficult to

reconcile. The final tragedy of the *Oresteia*, the *Eumenides*, dramatises a similar reconciliatory process between the demands of the past and those of the future. The trilogy culminates in the celebration of Athena's judicial court, but the final reconciliation is not achieved by Athena's lawful judgement, but by her power to convince the furies to take their place within the new Athens as the *Eumenides*, the Kindly Ones. They are not banished, nor are their passions of vengeance denied. Rather, in their new function, they will embody "that ultimate sanction of fear which underlies the new order, as it dominated the old" (Vellacott in Aeschylus: 20). Athena's mediation—and perhaps it is possible to draw an analogy here with the mediation of the TRC—signifies the inauguration of a new social and political order; one in which the old is not simply discarded, but reconciled with the new. However, just as Athena's mediation is imperfect,⁹ so the TRC's mediation entailed sacrifice and loss. And just as the new order that Athena establishes remains precarious, so post-apartheid South Africa finds itself in a similarly precarious and fragile state. The *Oresteia* dramatises this complexity. As J.G. Finlayson states, rather than simply instructing how reconciliation can and should be achieved,

It is as if Aeschylus is telling us that justice, reason, and lawfulness are not established facts that need merely be recognised for what they are by an act of theoretical contemplation but ongoing practical tasks within the new social order, and reconciliation between the different ethical powers, between citizens and their new institutions is not a state already attained but an ongoing process. (1999: 516)

⁹ As Christopher Rocco explains, the "solution" of the *Eumenides* is achieved through Athena's clever manipulative rhetoric and entails the hierarchization of values (the subordination of the Furies to the Olympians, of barbarian to Greek, of female to male), so that "the democratic rhetoric of equality, reason and consent legitimates the institutionalization of exclusionary polarities into systematized hierarchies, rather than creating a truly democratic order" (1997).

Importantly, the furies not only represent the spirit of revenge, but also the imperative to remember evil. As Booth argues, in societies undergoing the transition to democracy this “weight of the claims of the past and their clash with those of the present and future, are most visible” (777-778). We may wonder what has happened to the furies of revenge in post-apartheid South Africa. Though the dominant discourse of forgiveness denied them an official place within the new democratic “rainbow” nation, they undoubtedly still roam under the surface, haunting perpetrators and victims and fighting their fight against forgetting. Fleishman and Farber dramatise the start of what will be a long process of reconciliation and emphasise the demands of the future, but they also seem intent on helping the furies in their fight to remember the past. Their plays bring the TRC back to life and in so doing they re-activate (and in a sense rescue) the stories that the TRC once uncovered, but that now, almost a decade after its final report was published, have acquired an almost archival status.¹⁰ Because as Fleishman states, theatre can re-enact and thereby keep the past alive within the present, theatre can make absences present. Most importantly, perhaps, theatre can connect the past to the yet unfulfilled future.¹¹

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¹⁰ Not that the TRC process ever officially reached a point of closure. Though its final report was published in 1998, many of its recommendations to the government (about legally following up on those perpetrators who did not apply for amnesty or were rejected and about implanting a policy of reparation with which to compensate former victims) have yet to be put into practice.

¹¹ Mark Fleishman in his lecture at the 2007 International Federation for Theatre Research conference “Theatre in Africa/Africa in Theatre”, University of Stellenbosch, South Africa.

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