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ORESTES AND OEDIPUS, WHITE AND BLACK: GREEK TRAGEDY AND THE U.S. CIVIL WAR



This essay has its roots in the classroom when I was teaching a course on ancient and modern tragedy in which we read both Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra* and Rita Dove's *Darker Face of the Earth*. Juxtaposing them in this way, I became interested in the fact that two twentieth-century American playwrights, one white and one black, one male and one female, modeled plays on Greek tragedy and set them around the Civil War. Why, writing before and after the Crash of 1929, would you set a Greek tragedy after the Civil War if you were not interested in race politics? Yet it would seem from criticism of the play and from O'Neill's own words that race was not on his mind in his trilogy based on Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill seems to minimize the racial implications of the historical period he chose. Did he win the Noble prize, as some thought, because in that play he had become soft and safe? In 1994, Rita Dove wrote *Darker Face of the Earth*, an Oedipus play set in the ante-Bellum south. Dove is the first black poet laureate and one of two black writers to win a Pulitzer; she has also been accused of being too acceptable to the literary establishment and abandoning her responsibilities to her race. In what follows, I will be asking whether these criticisms are justified, and to what extent using the ancient story and form leads to the perceived lack of political edge in these plays.

O'Neill's interest in tragedy has attracted a great deal of interest. He frequently tried new forms, as Tony Kushner points out in his review essay on the playwright.¹ He so often broke new ground that one critic

1. Kushner (2004).

wished he would stand still for a while.² His interest in the Greeks can be seen in several other plays, but of them all (*Strange Interlude*, *Lazarus Laughed*, *Dynamo*, *Desire under the Elms* are often mentioned in this regard), *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the one most closely modeled on the structure of a Greek tragedy.³

It certainly seems that the trilogy is predominantly a formal experiment. In the period (1926-31) when O'Neill was working on the plays, the Europeans were turning again to tragedy. O'Neill had studied Nietzsche while in college and had just read Hoffmanstahl's *Elektra* when he began thinking that he wanted to do a "Modern psychological drama using one of the old legend plots of Greek tragedy for its basic theme — the Electra story? — the Medea?"⁴ It would seem that he was interested in the psychological as he was in so many other plays, but that interest was mixed with the classical, as he saw it. Though other writers, like Arthur Miller, understood modernity itself and capitalism as driving tragedy, for instance in the case of a Willy Loman, O'Neill found fate in the psyche. He was aware of the problem he faced in writing a modern tragedy; thus, in the same journal entry, he asks "Is it possible to get modern psychological approximation of Greek sense of fate into such a play, which an intelligent audience of today, possessed by no belief in gods or supernatural retribution, could accept and be moved by?"

He was especially attracted to the Greeks because he saw something of stature there, and he wanted to write something "big." As he said in a letter to A. Quinn: "Where theatre is concerned, one must have a dream, and the Greek dream in tragedy is the noblest ever."⁵

the one eternal tragedy of Man in his glorious, self-destructive struggle to make the Force express him instead of being, as an animal is, an infinitesimal incident in its expression ... it is possible — or can be! — to develop a tragic expression in terms of transfigured modern values and symbols in the theatre which may to some degree bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage.

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2. Miller and Frazer (1997) 47, cited in Krasner (2005) 145.
 3. Black (2004, 2005).
 4. O'Neill (1987a) Spring 1926.
 5. April 3, 1925, in O'Neill (1988a) 195-96.

He continually refers to *Mourning Becomes Electra* in his letters as a “big job”. He also saw in tragedy a form with “deeper spiritual understandings” that “released them from the petty greeds of everyday existence.” And, highly relevant to *MBE*, he viewed the struggling hero as “exhilarating! He may be a failure in our materialistic sense. His treasures are in other kingdoms. Yet isn’t he the most inspiring of all successes?”⁶

That sense of grandeur may hang over the trilogy and even weigh it down in some critics’ eyes; certainly O’Neill has been accused of everything from bad writing to melodramatic excess; as Chaman Ahuja says, “The sharp contrariety of these opinions reflects the diversity of verdicts in O’Neill criticism. Indeed, one is baffled by the spate of bouquets from ardent admirers like George Jean Nathan, John Gassner or Brooks Atkinson on the one hand, and of brickbats from detractors like Francis Fergusson, Mary McCarthy or Eric Bentley on the other. Hailed as a cultural hero, recognized as the most original, and most theatrical American dramatist of the twentieth century, and lauded as the creator of the modern tragedy, O’Neill has, at the same time, been damned as that too-morbid Black Irishman who wrote grandiose melodrama which is unrealistic, unsocial and pessimistic.”⁷ Eric Bentley grants that he succeeded in melodrama, but says that he wanted to be serious as well; while O’Neill’s awards show that he was successful at being serious, Bentley questions whether he is artistically successful as well.⁸ O’Neill’s effort at tragedy leads to a play that is often heavy-handed, and it is not often restaged.

O’Neill sets an Oedipal *Oresteia* in New England right after the Civil War. He also put distance between his play and the Greek models; as he said to his friend George Nathan, he was trying to keep the trilogy a se-

6. Interview with Mary Mullett (1922) 118, 120, cited in Ahuja (1984) 7; Bowen (1960) 143.

7. Ahuja (1984) 1; see also Krasner (2005) 156. Ahuja (1984) 54-5 sees a problem for O’Neill in having too many influences: “he still continued to reiterate his original ideal of the Greek brand of tragic exaltation. Since the quality of his own experiences was Strindbergian, his vision Nietzschean, his conflicts Jungian, his devices expressionistic, and his aim the Dionysian equivalent of Greek tragedy, the dramatic structure that he evolved lacked organic unity.”

8. Bentley (1987) 34.

cret because he didn't want people "to come with Agamemnon & Co in their heads expecting this or that to happen in a certain way."⁹ He rightly claims that he has pared away the Greek similarities "almost" entirely.¹⁰ This comparison or reference-hunting is often the problem with the reception of any version of an ancient drama. He wanted the play to be modern.

Despite these caveats or concerns on O'Neill's part, however, the plot and structure make clear the connection first to the *Oresteia*; we can also hear echoes of the Sophoclean and Euripidean *Electra* plays, and even to *Iphigeneia*.¹¹ In the first play, the *Homecoming*, the Agamemnon figure, Ezra Mannon, returns from the Civil War and is killed by his wife Christine, who has been having an affair with Adam Brant, Ezra's cousin. Brant is the son of David Mannon and Marie Brantôme, a nurse maid in the Mannon household; when they fell in love and she became pregnant, Abe Mannon, the patriarch and David's brother, exiled them from the family. He destroyed that house, and built the one that is the current set for most of the play. David later committed suicide, and Marie died penniless and alone.

Brant has come to the Mannon household seeking revenge through Christine. In the last act of the first play, Lavinia, the *Electra* figure, finds her mother standing over her dying father with a small box hidden behind her back; with his last breath, Ezra tells Lavinia that it is "not medicine." Lavinia vows to punish her mother. In the second play, *The Hunted*, the son, Orin, returns home from the War; Lavinia convinces him to kill Christine and Brant.

Though O'Neill eliminates Cassandra entirely and makes major changes in all the characters (and the murder weapon is poison, the woman's method, as he notes in his *Diary* of April 1929), he most significantly departs from the ancient versions in the final play, *The Haunted*. Here, Orin kills himself in guilt at what he has done, and Lavinia condemns herself to living death in the family home. The guilt stems in part from the fact that the murders were motivated entirely by sexual jealousy, not at all out of a desire for justice. This interpretation of the

9. O'Neill (1987b) 121, letter to Nathan April 7, 1931.

10. O'Neill (1987b) 120.

11. Miller (2000).

motive might still be classical in origin, since there are hints in Euripides and Sophocles that the children, particularly Electra/Lavinia, are working out rivalries with the parents. Virginia Floyd argues that he “turns to Sophocles, rather than Aeschylus, for his interpretation of Electra”, and there is no doubt that the rivalry between the two women is much stronger in that play than in Aeschylus’ trilogy.¹²

But it is Aeschylus’ resolution that is impossible for O’Neill — the shrine of Apollo and the court of the Areopagus no longer exist. O’Neill was intensely aware of what has changed since antiquity and said “What we need is a definition of Modern and not Classical Tragedy by which to guide our judgments. If we had Gods or a God, if we had a Faith, if we had some healing subterfuge by which to conquer Death, then the Aristotelian criterion might apply in part to our Tragedy. But our tragedy is just that we have only ourselves.”¹³

In O’Neill’s interpretation of the ancient myth, we can’t help but see the influence of Freud. Though O’Neill denied the Freudian influence being specific,¹⁴ he frequently admits to having known the work of both Freud and Jung.¹⁵ O’Neill had been in analysis briefly, and Freud was widely talked about in the bohemian world that he frequented. This familiarity with the basic tenets of Freudianism might also lead to the similarities to Hamlet noticed by Horst Frenz and Martin Mueller;¹⁶ as early as 1949, Ernest Jones put *Hamlet* and *Oedipus* together, and one can readily add Orestes to the mix.

It is Freud who enables incest to replace family violence as the motive force behind the drama; through Freud *Mourning Becomes Electra* fulfills O’Neill’s plan to create a modern approximation of fate in the psyche. Jealousy and rivalry, incestuous desires, fill every scene. Significantly, the words “queer” and “strange” recur often throughout the trilogy.¹⁷ What is “strange” or “queer” about this family is sexual in that

12. (1981) 185.

13. O’Neill (1988a) 390; letter to Brooks Atkinson, June 13, 1931.

14. O’Neill (1988a) 386; letter to Barrett H. Clark June 6, 1931; Bogard (1988) 345.

15. Bogard (1988) 346 speculates about the connection between O’Neill and Macgowan’s book, *What Is Wrong with Marriage*.

16. Frenz and Mueller (1966) 85-100.

17. Queer and strange appear 32 and 46 times respectively according to Hunt (2006); queer recurs 31 times according to Masterson (2011).

they harbor not so subtle incestuous desires for one another; the Freudianism is laid on pretty thickly. The parents and the children are doomed to love only one another, or replacements for each other. Thus Lavinia is over-identified with her father and refuses her suitor, the normal Peter, because she must take care of him. Peter says he has his mother to do that, and Lavinia replies “(sharply) He needs me more!”¹⁸ She furthermore claims to love Peter as a brother. Christine openly accuses her of incestuous desires: “You’ve tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Orin! You’ve always schemed to steal my place!” (*MBE* 289).

Orin is in love with his mother, kills Brant out of jealousy over his mother, and makes a none too subtle sexual suggestion to Lavinia (p. 411):

Lavinia: You know I love you! Make Hazel give that up and I’ll do anything — anything you want me to!

Orin: You mean that? . . .

You don’t seem to feel all you mean to me now — all you have made yourself mean — since we murdered Mother!

Lavinia: Orin!

Orin — I love you now with all the guilt in me — the guilt we share! Perhaps I love you too much, Vinnie!

Lavinia: You don’t know what you’re saying!

Orin: There are times now when you don’t seem to be my sister, nor Mother, but some stranger with the same beautiful hair. . . Perhaps you’re Marie Brantôme, eh? And you say there are no ghosts in this house?

Orin is blackmailing Lavinia here (trying to make her “feel as guilty” as he does (*MBE* 411), but that doesn’t mean that there is not an undercurrent of desire for her as the latest replacement of the other women in the family. As Mark Masterson and Kristin Hunt point out, the family refuses or is unable to follow the heteronormative script for gendered behavior; Hunt argues that they are punished for these desires.¹⁹ Both critics draw attention to the cross-gendered behavior of Lavinia and Orin as part of what makes the play queer.

18. O’Neill (1995) 271. Future references to the plays will be made in the text.

19. (2000) 142-45.

It is tempting to read O'Neill's work autobiographically; much of it seems modeled on his own family, and he consistently wrote about his work to friends and critics, so we have his own thoughts. I would argue here for a version of the feminist slogan that the "personal is the political": the play offers a social criticism based on that psychology. The social dimension is first and foremost the struggle between Puritanism and paganism, which Lavinia experiences personally. At the play's opening, the stage directions describe Lavinia as "thin, flat-breasted and angular ... Her movements are stiff and she carries herself with a wooden, square-shouldered military bearing. She has a flat dry voice and a habit of snapping out her words like an officer giving orders" (*Homecoming* 267). Lavinia adopts her father's mannerisms and the body language of the military, but at the same time, she looks like her mother, and in particular shares her hair color (266), which we later find out Marie Brantôme also had. The family is marked as Puritan by Christine, when she says that the house is "a sepulcher! The 'whited' one of the Bible-pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness" (273). The house was built in hatred and repression of the illicit desire between Marie and David, Ezra's brother.

In the course of the trilogy Lavinia moves from identification with her Puritan father to identification with her sensual mother, adopting her hair style with curls freely flowing and her green dress, characteristic of life in contradiction to her black dress of mourning (*The Haunted* 385). Orin has become like his father. In the penultimate scene, Lavinia points to the family portraits: "I'm mother's daughter — not one of you! I'll live in spite of you!" But the stage directions tell us that she "(*She squares her shoulders, with a return of the abrupt military movement copied from her father which she had of old ... and marches stiffly from the room.*)" (*The Haunted* 414). She ends the play by saying "I'm the last Mannon... It takes the Mannons to punish themselves for being born" (423). Though this statement might seem a capitulation to the repressive societal forces of the beginning, O'Neill did not see it as defeat. Not only did O'Neill find the tragic figures "exhilarating" (see above), but he had this to say about Lavinia: "I flatter myself I have given my Yankee Electra an end tragically worthy of herself! ... She rises to a height there and justifies my faith in her! She is broken and not broken! By her way of

yielding to her Mannon fate she overcomes it. She *is* tragic!”²⁰ O’Neill was surprised that Electra had such a banal ending in the ancient tradition; he saw her as a serious tragic figure, and he coached the actress to play her without pathos telling her “Not to feel sorry for Lavinia.”²¹ Because of his belief in the nobility of tragic suffering, O’Neill is satisfied with what might seem a sterile conclusion, more similar to the Sophoclean Electra than to the Aeschylean model.²² O’Neill himself saw a connection between the “Greek plot of crime and retribution chain of fate” and New England Puritanism, “the conviction of man born to sin and punishment.”²³

The concept of the mask ties the Greek to the puritan elements of the plays. Masking typically does important theatrical work, with its signal of artificiality; ancient Greek plays were performed with masks. The modernist period saw a great deal of interest in the mask, either from ritual or traditional drama, or from psychological theories.²⁴ Susan Smith points out that the “Jungian notion of the frozen person, a protective and false social self, forms the theoretical basis for many of Eugene O’Neill’s plays.”²⁵ O’Neill had used physical masks in earlier work; he wrote about their utility in his “Memoranda on Masks,” saying: “Not masks for all plays, naturally. Obviously not for plays conceived in purely realistic terms. But masks for certain types of plays, especially for the new modern play, as yet only dimly foreshadowed in a few groping specimens, but which must inevitably be written in the future.”²⁶

He toyed with the idea of using actual masks in earlier drafts of *MBE* but ultimately decided against doing so because he thought they would be too explicitly classicizing: “So it evolved ultimately into the ‘masklike

20. O’Neill (1988a) 389, letter to Brooks Atkinson, 19 June.

21. Alexander (1992) 168.

22. Stephen Black (2004) 185,186-7, makes the connection to Emily Dickinson’s life in retreat, “the idea of this brilliant woman secluding herself in her ancestral home to contemplate the inner and outer worlds must have been as striking to O’Neill as it has been to countless others” (185). So perhaps there is a writer’s future awaiting Lavinia.

23. O’Neill (1987a) April 1929.

24. Smith (1984) 1-11.

25. Smith (1984) 11.

26. O’Neill 1932, reprinted in Clark (1965) 503.

faces,' which expressed my intention tempered by circumstance."²⁷ The masks reveal the similarity of the family members. We are first told that Christine's face is "unusual ... One is struck at once by the strange impression it gives in repose of being not living flesh but a wonderfully life-like pale mask in which only the deep-set eyes, of a dark violet blue, are alive" (266). Lavinia is said to have a similarity to her mother that she represses, especially "the strange, life-like mask impression her face gives in repose" (267); Brant (277) and the portrait of Ezra (284) have a "life-like mask expression," and when Orin returns in *The Haunted*, "the Mannon semblance of his face in repose to a mask is more pronounced than ever" (385). This Puritan family is fated by their similarity to the living dead, and they must be unmasked, experience self-knowledge, to escape. It is significant that in the end Lavinia, dressed in mourning, "appears flat-chested and thin. The Mannon mask-semblance of her face appears intensified now" (416). Lavinia puts her mask back on when she enters the house — she wears a death mask because mourning has become her, or she has become mourning.

The concept of masking further enables O'Neill to expand from the family to the environment.²⁸ The house itself is specifically a mask, the front of a Greek temple (263); in his notes, O'Neill called the Mannon house a "grotesque perversion of everything a Greek temple expressed of meaning of life".²⁹ As noted above, Christine feels the deadly connotations of the house: "Each time I come back after being away it appears more like a sepulcher! The 'whited' one of the Bible-pagan temple front stuck like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness!" (273). She calls the house "a temple" for Abe Mannon's hatred; masking his feelings for Marie, he built this house having destroyed the one she had lived in.

Is there also a social-political critique in this play beyond the political aspect of the play's sexual dimension that I have teased out above?³⁰ I started from the suspicion that it was not likely that this element would be completely missing from *Mourning Becomes Electra*, despite its focus on the psychological family drama. If O'Neill has written a critique of

27. Cargill (1961)120.

28. Joseph Rice (1992) sees the masked house as a reference to the Oedipus myth.

29. O'Neill (1987a) 87.

30. See Nugent (1991); Masterson (2011); Hunt (2006).

the family and the inheritance of New England Puritanism, we can further make a political connection in the historical background to the trilogy. Egri comments that the “history of American Puritanism, as indeed in the whole development of the nation, the Civil War of 1861-65, bringing the victory of the industrialized North over the slave-keeping plantation owners of the South, was a decisive event that gave a new impetus to an uninhibited upsurge of capitalistic economy, industry and liberalism.”³¹ O’Neill had a radical critique, as the Bohemian world he inhabited led him not only to Freud and Jung, but also to radical writers and friendships. The artistic group that gave him his first start in theater, The Provincetown Players, was predominantly progressive. It is well known, for instance, that he was friendly with the leftists of the day, in particular John Reed, a founder of the U.S. Communist Party.

Form and content worked together where in *The Hairy Ape*, O’Neill used expressionism to address social issues. He calls the play “propaganda” “in the sense that it was a symbol of man, who has lost his old harmony with nature, the harmony which he used to have as an animal and has not yet acquired in a spiritual way.”³² *Hairy Ape* was one of the most avowedly political of his plays; in those days he saw himself as “an active socialist” and a “philosophical anarchist.”³³ These friends became disenchanted with him, however, and criticized his lack of political edge in plays other than *Hairy Ape* and *Emperor Jones*.³⁴ O’Neill was troubled (as he was about the Freudian interpretation) by the ways in which he was viewed politically. In an interview about his casting of Paul Robeson in *God’s Chillun* he asked: “Why was I made the apostle of the revolution by the IWW and proper timber for the Republican Party by conservatives as a mocker of the IWW when my Hairy Ape was produced. What bearing had such comment on my function as dramatist?”³⁵ He claimed the higher ground of abstraction, asking whether it wasn’t “a commonplace” that an “artist must be a breaker down of barriers? What is the theatre for if not to show man’s struggle, whether he is

31. Egri (1988) 46.

32. Clark (1965) 195, interview in the New York *Herald Tribune*, Nov. 16, 1924.

33. Wolter (1999) 648.

34. Pfister (1995) 165-6.

35. Estrin (1990) 47, interview with Louis Kantor, May 11, 1924.

black, green, orange or white, to conquer his life; his effort to give it meaning?”³⁶

O’Neill had not stopped writing political plays; other plays written in the years before and after *Mourning Becomes Electra* were concerned with issues of the day, though they are perhaps not as confrontational as *Hairy Ape*. Jürgen Wolter argues that “Although the references to the social and political contexts are less direct in his plays of the 1920s and 1930s, O’Neill’s concern about key issues of the decades, such as racism and xenophobia, was unabated.”³⁷ From the beginning, O’Neill makes a socio-economic analysis clear with the mercantile background of the Mannon family and their very name, resonant with mammon. The house reveals the wealth and exclusiveness of the family. As the play opens, the hired hand, Seth, is showing the house off. He says that the Mannons are “strict about trespassin’” (265, cf. 273); they made a lot of money in shipping and have been “top dog around here for near on 200 years, and they don’t let folks fergit it” (265). Puritanism was associated with bourgeois economics of thrift and the attendant demand that sexuality be pressed into the service of the family. These brief lines show that O’Neill’s desire for the stature of high art and the power of the classics did not mean that he gave up on his desire to make a social commentary.

O’Neill’s critique of the Mannons’ wealth is a kernel of his later critique of the U.S. in *More Stately Mansions*. America, he says,

“is going to get it — really get it. We had everything to start with — everything — but there’s bound to be a retribution. We’ve followed the same selfish, greedy path as every other country in the world. We talk about the American Dream, and want to tell the world about the American Dream, but what is that dream, in most cases, but the dream of material things? I sometimes think that the United States, for this reason, is the greatest failure the world has ever seen. We’ve been able to get a very good price for our souls in this country — the greatest price perhaps that has ever been paid — but you’d think that after all these years, and all that man has been through, we’d have sense enough — all of us — to understand that the whole secret of human happiness is summed up in a sentence that even a child can understand. The sentence? ‘For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his on soul?’”³⁸

36. Estrin (1990) 47.

37. Wolter (1999) 649.

38. Estrin (1990) 230, also cited in Murphy (1998) 302.

Clearly, O’Neill did not give up his evaluation of American materialism — the American people have sold their souls and the right to human happiness.

To return to my original question about race relations and the play, we run into trouble when we try to push the social criticism further. Although *Mourning Becomes Electra* takes place against the backdrop of the Civil War. O’Neill asserted that the historical setting was not significant:

Greek tragedy plot idea — No matter in what period of American history play is laid, must remain modern psychological drama — nothing to do with period except to use as mask — What war? . . . Revolution too far off. . . World War too near and recognizable . . . (audience would not see fated wood because too busy recalling trees) — needs distance and perspective — Period not too distant for audience to associate it with, yet possessing costume etc. — possessing sufficient mask of time and space, so audience will unconsciously grasp at once it is primarily drama of hidden life forces — fate — behind lives of characters. Civil War is only possibility — fits into picture — Civil War as background for drama of murderous family love and hate —³⁹

In other words, he claims to have used it as the tragedians used Troy, to get historical distance, arguably, for the discussion of the 5th century present.

But we do not need to take everything O’Neill says as gospel. The historical setting is clearly more than that. The Civil War was the national approximation of family hate; it was based on deep differences between the North and the South, as members of the same nation/family, not only on slavery, but the racial divide between north and south was prominent, though not as clear cut as it appears to school children and others today in the north and the south. It was about slavery, though not exclusively so.

So, for instance, O’Neill shows the effects of war on the characters. All the men have a great deal to say about their experiences. Interestingly enough, Ezra comes back rededicated to life; he is sexually interested in Christine because, as he says, “Death was common... It made me think of life” (308). This is a classic case of too-late learning, of course. Furthermore, according to both Ezra and Lavinia, the War has made a man out of Orin and taken him from his babyish adoration of his

39. O’Neill (1987a) Cap d’Ail, France — April 1929.

mother. But Orin has learned a great deal in the process. Thus, when Lavinia tells him to forget the war, Orin says it is “inside us who killed” (347). He explains to her that he is not a hero; he acted against orders, and his father decided to make him a hero instead of court martialing him. None of that is specific to the Civil War and its issues, of course, though Orin’s experience is tied into internal struggle since he dreams that he is killing his father and himself when killing others (347). While it is sometimes difficult to see the humanity, and therefore the similarity, of the enemy, in this war it was difficult to ignore that element.

What about the racial politics? Are they eliminated because *Mourning Becomes Electra* is set in the north? In truth, O’Neill only mentions slavery and blacks twice. Early on, the gardener Seth complains about the “nigger cook” ordering him around: “You’d think I was her slave! That’s what we get fur freein’ em!” (267). Then, Ezra says Christine makes him feel like a slave owner in their sexual encounter: “You let me take you as if you were a nigger slave; made me appear a lustful beast” (314). Here, we can see that the north is not exempt from the idiom or attitudes of slavery. This is an important contribution to making the war more complicated, and would have been relevant to northerners in O’Neill’s day who were not immune to race politics.

Moreover, the two songs that O’Neill utilizes as “atmosphere” and to replace the Greek chorus conjure up both the south and the War. As the first play opens, the stage directions tell us that “John’s Brown Body” is playing and “a man’s voice is heard singing the chanty ‘Shenandoah’ — a song that more than any other holds in it the brooding rhythm of the sea” (265). O’Neill brings it back more than once, and importantly, at the end of the trilogy. In the beginning of Act IV of *The Haunted*, the “chanty ‘Shenandoah,’ ... drifts over the water” (354); Brant says slightly later, when he hears another dirge, that he won’t be shipping out because the sea “doesn’t want [me] now — a coward hiding behind a woman’s skirts! The sea hates a coward!” (358). On the explicit level, then, the music refers to the sea and Brant’s failure to live up to the sailors’ code. The song might have held other echoes for the audience in the theater, however, since it was almost a theme song for Virginia and therefore would have summoned up images of the South, as it does today.

Early in the play, “John’s Brown Body” is being played to mark the end of the War, and the return of Ezra Mannon. It is heard by Christine (266) and Lavinia (267-8); O’Neill uses it to distinguish between them — Christine fears it and Lavinia’s “eyes light up with a grim satisfaction, and an expression of strange vindictive triumph comes into her face” (268). The song had many different sets of lyrics, including “Glory Glory Hallelujah, which give different meanings to the tune, but the association of “John Brown’s Body” is definitely with the Union and violent side of the abolitionist movement, and O’Neill uses that name for the song.⁴⁰ Thus, O’Neill sets the play musically in the context of the war, invoking both the South and the North.

Race is not just a matter of black and white, however, and given the “Irish problem” of the early twentieth century and his father’s staunch Irish Catholicism, O’Neill might well have understood the malleability of race and seen it as more than a black-white issue. The phrase “black Irishman” I used above has been used to explain O’Neill’s temperament. Crosswell Bowen relates two stories that use that phrase and emphasize the importance of being Irish to O’Neill. First, when Bowen went to New London to do research, he talked to Thomas Fortune D’Orsey; in that conversation, he says, he “discovered the theme of my piece. ‘Young Eugene,’ he told me, ‘was the gloomy-type Irishman, brooding, always readin’ books — a black ‘Irishman!’”⁴¹ And Eugene junior “recalled that O’Neill had once told him that ‘the critics have missed the most important thing about me and my work—the fact that I am Irish.’”⁴²

For instance, the townspeople object to Christine because she is queer and “furrin-looking.” He further emphasizes ethnic discrimination, using it as a displacement for race-based slavery. Marie Brantôme is called a “Canuck” several times in the first act, and her low status bothers Lavinia. She is an outsider, foreign and probably Catholic. She and David break every convention — they have sex out of marriage, and marry outside of ethnic and class lines. The other Mannon men hide their desire for Marie behind righteousness, and they kill her by refusing minimal humane (Christian?) support. The Puritan theme is based on

40. Randall (2005).

41. Bowen (1960) viii.

42. Bowen (1960) viii.

the Mannon hypocrisy about their desires for the outsider woman with the exotic-erotic hair.

Yet we cannot ignore the statements that O'Neill made: he intended his use of the Greeks and the Civil War to enable him to move away from explicit propaganda art. He used that War to gain appropriate distance from the present not because he wanted to address its issues. In the end, I would argue that we can see O'Neill's lack of radical critique of race in another aspect of the play: the romanticization of the racialized other that creeps into the play. Having set up the opposition of pagan and Puritan, O'Neill locates sexual desire not only in women (Marie, Christine, and the unrepressed Lavinia) who are punished by Puritanism, but also in a far off place where the "natives" enjoy free sexuality.

Brant and Orin both fantasize about the South Sea Islands, which represent an exoticized state of nature, a paradise. The Islands come up first between Adam and Lavinia; he calls them "Blessed Isles" where "you can forget there all men's dirty dreams of greed and power". He tells Lavinia that "they had found the secret of happiness because they had never heard that love can be a sin" (279). This distant place is reminiscent of another time as well, the time before the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Orin too has a dream, based not on reality but on a book he read, "Typee" (342). The island is the site of his fulfillment of repressed desires for incest: there would be no one there but him and Christine. The "other" time and place was also his childhood when Ezra was away at war. When Orin accuses Lavinia of desiring Avahanni (392-4, 401), she says "He made me feel for the first time in my life that everything about love could be sweet and natural." The elsewhere is, like the sea, a place for feeling that sexual love is natural. That possibility cannot be realized in New England, as we see when Lavinia consigns herself to living death in the house.

These islands also relate back to O'Neill's biography, for he had a similar feeling for the sea and these exotic places. In fact, O'Neill tried several times to escape to the sea. Therefore, it seems that he does not escape his biography; by going back to antiquity he avoids his own world, but re-meets his own psyche. That perhaps is why critics of O'Neill are so often biographers. The social and the psychological are thoroughly intertwined, making it difficult to see what O'Neill's politics really were.

Despite differences of race, gender, and historical period, Rita Dove shares a great deal with Eugene O'Neill. She too emphasizes fate; on re-reading Sophocles, she wondered "what is it that makes Oedipus interesting as a hero when his course has been set at birth? Why do we watch enthralled, if we already know his fate."⁴³ Dove has said she was interested in the myth because it addresses those questions "posed by great literature: unanswerable, yet forever asked." Like O'Neill, Dove too wanted to be judged as an artist first; she struggled against the demands of identity politics and waited to publish her first book of poetry until 1980, in what she perceived to be a more accepting time.⁴⁴

Unlike O'Neill, however, her modern version of fate is slavery, not psychology: "There I had my analogy. Rarely has history seen a system which fostered such a sense of futility as slavery."⁴⁵ She also said that "a slave in this system could not emerge whole (Berson [1996]). Is her play more sensitive to race politics than O'Neill's? Absolutely, but in *her* desire to avoid the appearance of propaganda, she focuses on the individual and mixture. As a result, she too may seem to pull her punches.

The Darker Face of the Earth uses the Oedipus story to structure a play taking place in the south from 1820 to 1840; in the play's prologue, plantation mistress Amalia has just given birth to a son who was fathered by one of her slaves, named Hector. She reluctantly agrees to sell the child to save his life. When the play proper opens, twenty years later, Amalia has just bought a new slave named Augustus, who has been highly educated by his former owner; he has a reputation for rebelliousness and, of course, he is her son. Amalia invites Augustus into the house to talk; they soon enter into a sexual relationship. At the same time Augustus becomes involved in a slave uprising. In the course of the play he kills both his actual father and Amalia's husband (because he assumes he had raped his slave mother). Though Augustus has been given the task of killing Amalia as a test of loyalty to the movement, he has difficulty doing so. She kills herself. In the 1994 print version, Augustus (Oedipus) dies at the end, but in the later version of the play pro-

43. McDowell (2001) 176, cf. Berson (1996).

44. Steffen/Dove (1997) 108. Cf. Dove and Dungey (2005) 1036.

45. McDowell (2000) 176.

duced and published, he lives and is lionized by the revolutionaries. In the version I saw, however, he ends up draped over the railing of a second floor balcony, looking like Christ on the cross. Dove approved of that ending, as well.

The play defies a simple black centered anti-white reading--what keeps Augustus trapped is not only slavery but also the hatred required by the liberation movement. He has feelings for Amalia, which make him hesitate to kill her, and she has feelings for him, which lead her to kill herself. When Dove changed the ending between editions and let Augustus live, it was not a triumph; she realized (like O'Neill) that some things were worse than death.⁴⁶ As in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Augustus does not triumph; he just survives even though the insurrection is successful, and the house is in flames.

In its emphasis on mixture within her treatment of slavery as fate, Dove's play may not satisfy the demands of identity politics. The play addresses history and makes the audience take seriously the impact of slavery on *all* by developing the white woman Amalia as a character and asking what losses she sustained. She establishes sympathy for her by opening the play with her trying to save her baby and by showing how the sex/gender system oppressed her. By addressing gender as well as race, the play avoids clearcut solutions.

Both O'Neill and Dove wanted to avoid writing so-called propaganda plays about their own day; they both use Greek plays as the structure and the past as setting to do so. To the extent that that double impulse comes from a desire to be "great" and "universal," the end result may seem quite tame to the reader looking for sharp social critique. In O'Neill's case, I would argue that the trilogy reveals that he was not radical about race; while tragedy could not make him more radical, it is not responsible for his vision. O'Neill seems dated, while Dove is very much our contemporary. She sees slavery as fate, but her simultaneous confrontation of race and gender avoids making villains and heroes in the past.

While Dove might seem to pull her punches, her play actually addresses the contemporary situation very well although she does not discuss the present. In the present day United States, mixture, shades of

46. Steffen (1997) 114.

brown not black and white, define the reality of race. Dove uses the South and its system of racist apartheid to enable Americans in particular to see the problems that we have inherited. The value of the play lies in its getting past a black and white dichotomy, exactly what is needed at this time of global traffic and mixing. In the end, by contrasting the two I hope to have shown that it is not the classical intertext that makes a text either progressive or conservative.

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