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Performing Democratic Protest: Gary Owen's *Iphigenia in Splott* and David Greig's *The Suppliant Women*

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ABSTRACT

This essay argues that Gary Owen's *Iphigenia in Splott* (2015) and David Greig's version of Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* (2016), directed in its inaugural tour by Ramin Gray, use opposite dramaturgical techniques to advocate for a comparable goal: increased direct democracy and civic responsibility. Owen uses the form of his didactic monologue play to highlight the destructive results of austerity politics. Effie, the play's protagonist, explicitly accuses the audience of being complicit with the destruction of the social safety net—policies which lead to the death of her baby. In contrast to Owen's single actor, Greig and Gray used Choruses of women recruited from each city the show toured to enact a civic collectivity. By having the audience's mothers, wives, sisters, etc. perform the powerful Choral role, the play encourages audiences to identify with refugees and elevates a democratic decision to support asylum seekers.

KEYWORDS

Adaptation, austerity, British drama, democracy, Greek Chorus, Greek drama, political economics.

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Introduction

In his *Politics*, Aristotle defines both citizenship and the *polis* through responsible cooperation. He writes, "someone who is eligible to participate in deliberative and judicial office is a citizen in this city-state, and that a city-state, simply speaking, is a multitude of such people" (1275[b].17-19). In other words, what defines a citizen is responsibility to the state, and what defines the state is the conglomeration of citizens. Therefore, the foundation of the *polis* is the mutually constitutive relationship between the individual and the collective; individual citizenship is meaningless without the collective, and the collective of the *polis* is incomprehensible without individual citizens. This relationship may seem straightforward, but getting the balance right is one of the most challenging elements of communal political life in any system intending to function as democratic. Today, democracy is under attack. Many are losing faith in the power of popular rule to achieve goals like social justice, relative economic equality, protection for the most vulnerable, ecological sustainability, or as basic a goal as competent world leadership. These critiques come from both the left and the right—and though the specific complaints are different, it should tell us something when people across the political spectrum echo the same doubts.

From the fifth to third century BCE, Athenian democracy was a fragile, contested political system opposed both by autocratic enemies outside the city-state and by anti-democratic aristocrats within Athens itself. Clearly, democracy today continues to have its share of enemies. However, Athenian democrats did have substantial tools at their disposal to promote the power of the *demos*, the people. One of the most potent of those tools was the theatre. Aristocratic advocates of democracy—like Pericles and Themistocles—sponsored playwrights whose work incorporated democratic values like rhetorical conflicts and rational judgment, freedom of speech, and direct representations of voting. Theatrical performances at the City Dionysia or the Lenaea were major religious festivals the majority of citizens would attend, so performances played a central role in shaping their worldviews and ideals.

Today theatre is less culturally influential, but contemporary playwrights still write in support of democracy. This paper examines two recent British productions—Gary Owen's *Iphigenia in Splott* (2015) and David Greig's version of Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women* (2016), directed in its inaugural tour by Ramin Gray—which adapt ancient Greek tragedies to critique the failures of contemporary representative institutions, and advocate for more substantial democratic power allotted to local communities. Though each play's democratic and communal goals are similar, the artists take diametrically opposite approaches to their protests. In Owen's monologue play, Effie's solo performance highlights the cultural and economic

deprivation of neoliberal Britain, which allots resources upward at the expense of the poor. Greig's play and Gray's tour, by contrast, fill the stage with locally recruited amateur Chorus members. This Chorus evokes a cosmopolitan sympathy for the plight of refugees who are suddenly identified with friends, family members, co-workers, etc. Blending textual and performance analysis, this paper argues that, although the two shows take almost opposite approaches to democratic performance, they ultimately seek the same goal: a more localized and responsive democratic system, which will see and value humanity, even in the downtrodden and the disempowered.

Athenian drama was a collective civic ritual—meaning it drew all citizens together, along with a range of non-citizens. The Chorus was a key role in tragedy, representing a collective voice always prepared to remind the protagonists of the larger implications and stakes of their actions. As theatre scholar Margherita Laera puts it, "Through melody and choreography, the chorus stood at the symbolic centre of the collective religious ritual, the City Dionysia, mirroring the audience and symbolically incorporating it into the show" (66). Thus, the texture of Attic tragedy incorporated a reminder that life in the *polis* was always shared, always collective. As part of the City Dionysia, theatre depended for its affective impact on communal experience. This collective aspect was built into the very structure of the Theatre of Dionysus; according to Samuel Shanks, a theatre scholar, "the theatron also organized the spectators spatially in a way that allowed them to easily see the faces of most of the other spectators. The ability to easily perceive the reactions of the rest of the members of the polis…doubtless contributed a great deal of communitarian energy" (47). This communitarian energy channeled back into the shared political life of Athenian democracy, which emphasized the responsibility of citizens to serve the *polis*, to preserve the life and shared good of the city-state.

Many theorists caution us about seeking a democratic model in Attic tragedy, given the mythologized origins of "Western civilization" in ancient Hellas. For instance, Laera warns that:

> The emphasis on the 'democratic' nature of Greek theatre suggests an appropriation of 'classical' tragedy by neoliberal discourses in an attempt to define the West in terms of individual freedom, empowerment and participation, which retrospectively elevate Athenian democracy as a model for our current political system, despite its exclusion of women, foreigners and slaves. (6)

This fear is certainly warranted, as an unbroken democratic thread from Athenian democracy to contemporary liberal democracies is a fundamental cultural myth justifying contemporary representative governments.[1] The differences between Greek and modern democracy are well

[1] See, for example, Hanink, Laera, or Cartledge for more information on modern political uses of ancient Greece.

documented—Athens had direct democracy for a limited number of citizens, all free and male, whereas modern nation-states have largely enfranchised populations insulated from actual decision-making power by bureaucratic and representative institutions. However, the myth of Greece as the origin point of a (largely phantasmatic) democratic tradition in the West is alive and well.[2] And we should be wary of any attempt to blind us to the anti-democratic elements of modern institutions.

At the same time, though, the political imaginary of Greek tragedy was more expansive and egalitarian than Attic political life, even at its most open, and we can draw on that imagined equality as an aspirational model. Classicist Edith Hall says that, "in tragedy the Athenians created a public dialogue marked by an egalitarian *form* beyond their imagination in actuality. Tragedy's multivocal form and heterogenous casts suggest an implicit egalitarian vision whose implementation in the actual society which produced it was absolutely inconceivable" (125, original emphasis). And this is the crucial point. We can imagine a more utopic democracy. We can imagine a system with local popular control exercised through the kind of direct democracy that would empower people within their own communities. We can imagine a political system where power is not insulated from the *demos*, the people, but in which the people's voice and will are directly expressed in a civic sphere built to acknowledge the equality dreamt of as the foundation for democratic justice. And theatre can play a crucial role in this imagining.

Iphigenia Alone: Metatheatre and Austerity in **Iphigenia in Splott**

Iphigenia in Splott ends with an overt anti-austerity warning. Effie, the lone character in the 75-minute monologue play, ends her narrative describing life in her Cardiff neighborhood:

More and more people packed in this little plot of land,

While they cut everything we need to make a life.

And we can take it…

We can take it cos we're tough, the lot of us.

But here's the fucking rub.

It seems, it's always places like this

And people like us who have to take it,

[2] Hanink argues that this tradition is largely a product of the Cold War, when right-wing Greek leaders played up Athenian democracy to gain support from the US and Britain. As she puts it, "The new Anglo-American 'democratic' ideal of classical antiquity was paraded in Greece by leaders [like Constantine Karamanlis] intent on proving to Britain and the United States that it was on the right side of history" (180).

When the time for cutting comes. (60-61)

As some theatre reviewers pointed out, this is an aggressively political ending to the play. In the *New York Times*, Ben Brantley said the play "is a work with a confrontational social conscience, a state of mind that's rarely conducive to subtlety."[3] By the play's end, Owen's critique of the human cost of austerity politics is abundantly clear as Effie's final didactic indictment of neoliberal politics—and the audience's complicity in those politics—follows the tragic loss of the baby she had hoped could bring stability to her life. Instead of focusing primarily on the overt element of *Iphigenia in Splott*'s political conclusion, I argue that the play's form prefigures its political stance, even before the socio-economic critique. The metatheatrical monologue form helps perform Owen's critique of economic injustice. By collapsing the Greek Iphigenia story into a one-person show, *Iphigenia in Splott* substitutes the civic collectivity of ancient Athenian theatre for the socio-economic isolation of individual consumers under neoliberal capitalism.

While broadly inspired by Greek mythology, *Iphigenia in Splott* bears only scant resemblance to Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the most direct predecessor for Owen's play. In essence, all that connects Owen's loose adaptation with its Euripidean source is the narrative of sacrificing a child for "the greater good." In Owens' show, Effie—a tough, street smart chav, played by Sophie Melville in the original Sherman Theatre production—recounts a one night stand with Lee, a one-legged former soldier. Effie is crushed when she finds out that he's married and she's pregnant. After initially deciding on an abortion, Effie changes her mind and chooses to keep the baby. She goes into early labor and the hospital doesn't have enough beds in the special care unit, so they send her to the next town. But when the ambulance crashes and Effie delivers her very premature daughter, the paramedics are unable to save the baby. Devastated, she sues the hospital, but drops the suit after the hospital's midwife convinces Effie the money she would collect would force the hospital to close more beds and diminish their services further. It is with this guilt that Effie ultimately confronts the audience: "I took this pain, / And saved every one of you, from suffering the same. / Your baby gets sick, she gets well / Because of me" (60). Effie sacrifices herself and her child on the altar of austerity politics.

The reduction of the Greek tragedy—with its Chorus and engagement in Athenian civic life—to a monologue play mirrors the austerity politics Owen critiques, and Effie's metatheatrical addresses implicate the audience. As Aristotle pointed out, life in the *polis* was a mixture of rights and privileges, duties owed by the citizen and duties owed to the citizen. The *polis* system attempted to balance communal responsibility, distributed amongst the citizens, in

[3] Similarly, Smith writes, "Owen's ultimate point is a political one and, if it's unsubtle, it's because politics is unsubtle."

order to achieve the most good for the city-state and the people. Today, on the other hand, under neoliberal ideology the notion of the public good or of collective responsibility to society as a whole has been substantially undermined. We see this distinctly in *Iphigenia in Splott*. Effie reflects on the businesses and services that once existed in the neighborhood, all closed now due to budget cuts, job losses, and declines in social support. She linguistically distances herself from this suffering by putting the words in her nan's mouth: "She says we used to live. You could live here and live well. / Now they're stacking us up and we're supposed to just exist" (2). In narrating the night at the club where she met Lee, Effie experiences a profound change. After she has sex with the ex-soldier, she tells us, "Lying there wrapped up in Lee I'm feeling something new. / That something new is – not alone. / I'm not alone. / And it feels like I'm gonna feel not alone, always" (22). This idea of being not alone becomes a refrain throughout the next portion of the play, a phrase Effie clings to even as it becomes increasingly clear that Lee is not going to call her (24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29).

There are more layers to this not-aloneness than I have page space for, but for this analysis the most important facet is precisely the feeling's ephemerality, not just in the obvious sense that Lee is married to another woman and has no interest in a relationship with Effie, but in the sense that Effie really is alone, alone on a stage where once her Grecian predecessor would have had a Chorus and other actors. In *Iphigenia in Splott* there is virtually nothing on stage to support Effie during her monologue. In the original Sherman Theatre production, the set—designed by Hayley Grindle, with lighting by Rachel Mortimer—had only a few hard plastic chairs as props and a row of horizontal fluorescent light bulbs, some fallen at odd angles, making up the backdrop.[4] This space suggests urban decay in a declining Britain. As reviewer Andrew Haydon wrote in *The Guardian*, "Set in a bleak world of strip-lights evoking everything from nasty nightclubs to run-down hospitals…[the play] is underscored with low rumbles of bass, machines and thunder…so much so that you can almost feel the cuts being made to austerity Britain while you watch." Against this sparse setting Effie tells her story, dances, rages, and weeps. Not only does the set suggest the decimated infrastructure of an austerity-stricken Cardiff, its starkness highlights just how alone Melville is on the stage. Not only does she have no one else to interact with—except the audience—there are almost no physical props to support her performance. Like the deceptive summons for Iphigenia to come marry Achilles in Euripides' play, Effie's feeling of not-aloneness is illusory and destined to lead to sacrifice.

[4] Images from the original performance run are available on the Sherman Theatre's website at https://www.shermantheatre.co.uk/performance/theatre/iphigenia-in-splott/ under the gallery section.

The notion of sacrifice is, according to Wendy Brown, at the heart of neoliberal austerity politics. In this sense, Effie's story profoundly differs from Iphigenia's, because while Iphigenia was an individual sacrificed under unusual circumstances, Effie sacrifices and is sacrificed (paradoxically at the same time) as part of a political economic theology. As Brown explains:

> individuals are required to provide for themselves in the context of powers and contingencies that radically limit their ability to do so. But they are also blamed for the woes of the whole and, more importantly, even when behaving properly, may be legitimately sacrificed for its survival…Instead of being secured or protected, the responsibilized citizen tolerates insecurity, deprivation and extreme exposure to maintain the productivity, growth, fiscal stability, credit rating, or market dominance of the firm or nation (or again, of the nation on the model of the firm). (10)

What this means is that contemporary neoliberal discourses blame the poor, the oppressed, and the dispossessed for not sufficiently investing in themselves as human capital, and these discursive forces are simultaneously always prepared to assign blame for financial instability to the poor, oppressed, and dispossessed, whom it then seeks to sacrifice for "the greater good." These sacrifices come in the form of abolished social programs, decreased funds for education or job training, or, as is evident in *Iphigenia in Splott*, cuts to health care and social services.

As cuts are passed on to the vulnerable, Brown argues, neoliberal ethics demand the poor bear these hardships stoically. She writes, "This citizen releases state, law, and economy from responsibility for and responsiveness to its own conditions and predicaments, and is ready to sacrifice to the cause of economic growth and fiscal constraints" (12). Effie's metatheatrical addresses to the audience are riven by the paradox of the neoliberal subject, at once enjoined to think of itself in purely economic terms of exchange, debt, and capital, and simultaneously to sacrifice itself for the larger economic whole (embodied, of course, in corporations, the wealthy, and stock values). The culture or urban poverty and desperation that has shaped Effie is particularly subject to ideological assault in British media. As Ben Lawrence puts it in his *Telegraph* review of the National Theatre production, "The so-called chav culture has been unremittingly mocked in the media and this attempt to humanize the sort of person sneered at in Channel 5 documentaries is long overdue. Girls such as Effie seem so isolated, so disempowered as to make life choices unimaginable." Denizens of Britain's impoverished, post-industrial urban landscape represent a convenient target for the mockery of neoliberal media/ideology. Lacking both the sophistication of the wealthier upper classes and the imagined idyllic qualities of Olde England-style villages and rural communities, the inner-city dweller is often presented as the cause of their own misery through drink, drugs, and promiscuity. Effie, in the elegant bluntness

of her counter-narrative confronts this tendency to dismiss people like her, demanding that her role in the latter-day *polis* be recognized.

Effie's two most striking metatheatrical moments come at the opening and the closing of the play, and they represent these competing poles. At the beginning of the performance, Effie uses economized language: "you lot, every single one / You're in my debt. / And tonight – boys and girls, ladies and gents – / I've come to collect" (1). She opens, in other words, by conceptualizing the theatre going experience, and her presence before us, as a financial transaction—a paying of debts. This opening prepares us for the Effie who pursues a lawsuit against the hospital after her baby's death. It does not prepare us for the Effie who drops the lawsuit, who follows austerity's sacrifice of her baby with the sacrifice of her own financial security. And make no mistake, this is an economic decision. Effie reflects, "And so. / I drop the case. / I don't, [*sic*] make anyone pay" (59). But is this a gesture of Effie's capitulation to neoliberal austerity? To the cultural imperative that the poor be sacrificed without complaint for the economic health of the corporate nation-state? Of course not. Unlike the subject Brown describes—one battered down to accept their precarious, sacrificial position unquestioned—Effie makes us witnesses to her sacrifice. Both in her renunciation of financial compensation and in her solitude on stage we have the indictment of the neoliberal world order. We have her profound protest against the socioeconomic system that has shaped her world, and that has taken from her the kind of civic collectivity supporting her Grecian predecessor.

Condensing the Iphigenia myth from a performance involving multiple actors, including a Chorus, to a monologue play fundamentally changes the internal economy of the play. Whereas Euripides' characters need only interact with one another—as Attic tragedy includes fairly little audience engagement—Effie has no one with whom to inter*act* apart from the audience, and so the play is laced through with metatheatrical challenges, accusations, appeals, and threats. What this means is that the audience is directly implicated in the sacrificial structure of the myth. In *Iphigenia in Aulis*, it is possible to think of ourselves as apart from the ethical causes and consequences of Agamemnon's sacrifice. Agamemnon kills his daughter, the Greeks sail to Troy. Even by the time Euripides' play was staged in 405 BCE, the events were a mythologized history. The audience (then and now) is not to blame. But the immediacy of Effie's accusations makes our guilt inescapable. In the death of her child and her choice to renounce whatever satisfaction would have been gained through a settlement, we as viewers cannot escape the confrontation with our own complicity in the economic system that prioritizes investments over the lives of the impoverished. This direct and unequivocal condemnation is a function of the play's monologic structure which leaves Effie with no one to address but the semi-tangible figure of a theatre audience. This isolation is neither innocent nor incidental, but is deeply rooted in the

very political economy that Effie's tragedy evokes—the economic violence underpinning neoliberal capitalism. The anti-collective, anti-democratic impulses of neoliberalism erode public support networks, placing overwhelming burdens on the poor, who are isolated further within an ideological system that values their lives less than corporate profit. But, as we've begun to see and shall see in more detail below, the poor and oppressed often resist their exploitation.

The Chorus as Democratic Crowd in **The Suppliant Women**

According to *The World of Athens* by the Joint Association of Classical Teachers, the earliest recorded instance in which a form of the later term *demokratia* appears is in Aeschylus' *The Suppliant Women*. The Joint Association writes, "The earliest shadow of the term 'democracy' comes in Aiskhylos' phrase *dēmou kratousa kheir*, 'the sovereign hand of the *dēmos*'" (200). In his 2016 adaptation, David Greig translates Aeschylus' line loosely, so the reference becomes more direct: the Chorus asks, "How did the city make its decision? / How does it work, this thing called 'democracy'?" (31). Although Cleisthenes' 508 BCE reforms prepared the way for popular rule, as far as we know, the Greek roots *demos* (meaning, 'the people') and *kratos* (meaning 'power' or 'control') had not come together to name a unique political system by the time *The Suppliant Women* was first performed shortly after 470 BCE, so Aeschylus' audience likely would not have been struck by the phrasing. But a modern British audience will immediately recognize Greig's more overt use of the term. This is not incidental. Greig's word choices in adapting Aeschylus' language combined with Ramin Gray's specific production decisions—especially in casting the Chorus—to create a show which advocates cosmopolitan identification with refugees and increased local democratic authority, contra modern representative institutions which insulate citizens from power. The language of the text and the texture of the performance become the media for this message.

Some of the earliest depictions of a democratic political system come from the plays of Aeschylus. The *Oresteia* dramatizes/mythologizes the emergence of the popular courts which were central to Athens' administration of justice by popular vote. And Classicist Paul Cartledge calls *Persians* a "hymn to democracy and civic-republican freedom" because it links Themistocles—a champion of the emerging democracy—with the Greek victory at Salamis over the autocratic Persian ruler Xerxes (83). But few plays from ancient Athens more directly glorify the collective rule of citizens than *The Suppliant Women*. The play is the first—and only surviving—part of the Danaid Trilogy, and tells the story of a group of Egyptian women who arrive at Argos seeking sanctuary. Fleeing enforced marriage to their cousins, the sons of

Aegyptos, they've returned to the Hellenic homeland of their ancestor, Io, to find protection. While hiding in a sacred grove, the Danaids and their father Danaos are met by King Pelasgos. When they put their case before the king, he says he must consult the Argive citizens council for a decision. Eventually, the council decides in favor of the Danaids, and the Argives defend the women from the Egyptians who come to kidnap and rape them. As Cartledge notes, "the manner in which [Pelasgos] ruled was strikingly, anachronistically democratic" (84-85). The democratic citizens council would not have been an historical feature of archaic Argos, but it would have been recognizable to Aeschylus' contemporary Athenian audience.

It was precisely this democratic ideology that Greig and Gray sought to capitalize on in their production. While Aeschylus' original version contains proto-democratic references, Greig's translation spends more time directly describing and advocating for democratic practices. Pelasgos and Danaos explain the democratic process to the Danaids, who, escaping autocratic Egypt, know only direct monarchic rule. At the end of the play, the Egyptians' anti-democratic attitudes are directly voiced. The Herald, an Egyptian official coming to kidnap the women, tells them, "Forget about voters. / The sons of Aegyptos are your masters now. / Democracy's anarchy" (41). Earlier in the play, the Danaids shared this assumption about monarchical power, pleading with Pelasgos to protect them himself: "You are the city, you are the people, / City and people are one in your name. / One throne, one vote" (22-23). But the king appeals to the will of his citizens, telling the refugees that the Argives must make the decisions themselves: "I've no choice, the city must vote" (23). And vote they do. Leaving the women, Danaos and Pelasgos go to persuade the Argive citizens' council, and when Danaos returns he reports that the citizens voted to offer sanctuary. The Danaids question: "How does it work, this thing called 'democracy'?" and Danaos explains, "The Greeks were unanimous! All in favor! / … / The air fair fizzed with right hands rising" (31). The raising of right hands was a common voting method in the Athenian *ekklesia* (citizen's assembly) and many other democratic institutions in Greece.[5]

The vote pits the citizens' xenophobic prejudice against Pelasgos' and Danaos' rhetorical skills. Rhetoric was central to Athenian political life. Danaos' and the Daniads' concerns about anti-immigrant prejudice will be discussed in more detail below, but the link between persuasion and democracy is directly evoked in Greig's translation. As he prepares to leave the Daniads for the vote, Pelasgos tells them:

I'll go now and gather the people of Argos,

I'll teach Danaos what to say in his speech.

I'll prepare ground so the town's sympathetic

[5] The Greeks called this practice *kheirotonia*, or 'extension of hands' (Cartledge 70).

And use all my skill to win you the vote.

May Zeus now give me his powers of persuasion. (28)

In other words, Pelasgos' preparations for the vote are rhetorical. He gathers his persuasive skill, marshals his arguments, and asks the gods for help convincing his citizens. In reporting the outcome of the vote, Danaos recounts, "King Pelasgos spoke with fervour, / … / Every word dripped with the art of persuasion. / The moment he finished, a forest of hands" (31-32). For the ancient Athenians, this would be politics as usual. Classics scholar Edith Hall claims that, "The multivocal form of tragedy, which allows diverse characters to speak (and, more importantly, to disagree with each other), reflects the contemporary development of rhetoric in democratic Athens, itself a product of the increased importance under the democracy of public debate" (118). Direct democracy was driven by the power of rhetoric to persuade, and those institutions were reflected through the argumentative structures of tragedy. Classicists Ian Storey and Arlene Allen explain that, "The extant dramatic texts, both tragic and comic, reveal their indebtedness to [Athenian] political institutions in the way they employ argument and counter-argument, leading to a decision to move their plots forward" (67). Drama thus served a practical, pedagogical function within the democracy by modeling the agonistic *modus operandi* of the assembly, council, and people's courts. Citizens viewing an agonistic contest in the theatre could exercise their critical judgment in assessing the various arguments made—a kind of training for participation in the political and judicial institutions of Athenian life.

Beyond the text, Gray's performance choices themselves reproduce the democratic elements implicit in Greek tragedy. Greig called the production "a piece of theatrical archaeology…we've decided that the way we want to approach it is to try and understand it as it would have been understood in its place and time" ("Making of The Suppliant Women"). For my purposes here, the most important decision to approaching the play in its ancient time and place was the recruitment of non-professional choruses. For the tour, Gray and Greig hired only three regular actors and two musicians, casting crowds of local volunteers as the Chorus, which is by far the most prominent role in *The Suppliant Women*. By the time Faber & Faber printed the play in 2017, the tour had created local Choruses in seven cities, using over 350 performers. The Choral performers were drawn from each city the play was brought to—Scottish women performing in Edinburgh at the Royal Lyceum, Irish women in Belfast, and women from Southwark and Lambeth at London's Young Vic. Many contemporary theatre makers blend professional theatre with community-engaged theatre, but John Browne—composer for *The Suppliant Women*—notes, "the Greeks invented this. This is how the original was done: there was a community Chorus and there was a couple of professional actors" ("Making of the Suppliant Women"). As Mark Fisher put it in reviewing the Royal Lyceum production, "form

and content combine. The performance is by the people." This technique ensured that each Chorus belonged, in a real way, to the city where they performed. A sense of ownership, of kinship, was central to the Athenian experience of Choruses, as Classics scholar Peter Wilson argues: "The *khoroi* that were at [theatre's] heart were the *city's khoroi*, and with the involvement of the polis came the culture of publicity characteristic of democratic Athens…The city as a collective entity promoted the proliferation of choral performances" (11, original emphasis). In other words, the choice to recruit and train Choruses of local women, rather than tour with a Chorus of professional actors, rooted each performance irrevocably in its own locale—a local relationship which will be discussed more below.

The other crucial performance element was that Gray put the Chorus at center stage—he not only allowed the Chorus to be the central, collective character (as Aeschylus wrote them), but his dramaturgy depended on that centrality. The women of the Chorus form a solid, living block which dominates the stage space, exuding power even as they seek protection from Pelasgos. In *The Telegraph*, Claire Allfree wrote, "The chorus move together as one, switching in an instant from keening lament to uninhibited celebration and driven ever onwards by an urgency that is both aesthetic and a literal bid for survival." Production photos, like the ones available at the Royal Lyceum's website, show the Chorus as a continual presence, even in photos centered on Oscar Batterham (Pelasgos) or Omar Ebrahim (Danaos).[6] The Actors Touring Company trailer gives an even better sense of the Chorus' powerful presence.[7] The professional actors barely appear, and the video is dominated by the rhythmic stamping of the Chorus rocking back and forth, moving across the stage inexorably closer to the camera ("Suppliant Women Autumn 2017").

The women of *The Suppliant Women*'s Chorus speak with a powerful, collective voice, providing a living model that teaches the values of a locally rooted democracy. The dominant presence, this collective body of women takes the central role, which struck several reviewers. As Allfree puts it in her review, the Chorus is powerful because "it's a grass roots gesture that enshrines the spirit of collectivity and communality in Aeschylus's drama far more effectively than any professional cast could." Fisher highlights the importance of the Chorus in Gray's productions, pointing out: "Modern productions tend to scale down numbers and focus on the leads, but it's no disrespect to [Gemma May, the Chorus Leader], Betterham or Omar Ebrahim's eloquent Danaos to say that the chorus is the soul of the show." And his *Guardian* colleague, Susannah Clapp echoes this sentiment: "The brilliant decision is to make the chorus, so often

[6] Photos are available at https://lyceum.org.uk/whats-on/production/909.
[7] Viewable on Youtube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TvQ3fFkPfIc&list=WL&index=13&t=0s.

embarrassing, ignored or dismembered in modern-dress productions, the governing voice of the play." Gray's dramaturgical decision to center the play on the Chorus as protagonist does, as we shall see more below, have profound democratic implications. But given the contemporary refugee crisis and the ways in which xenophobic anger and fear are challenging democratic institutions in many European and North American nations (not to mention an emerging anti-feminist backlash against the #MeToo movement), it's equally significant that *The Suppliant Women* casts local women as *this* Chorus.

What I mean by that is that the Daniads are a Chorus of refugee women specifically. In a remarkably prescient ancient foreshadowing of the movements of contemporary refugees, the Danaids flee North Africa and arrive in Greece seeking asylum—the exact route taken by so many fleeing North Africa and the Middle East today. By presenting local women in the roles of strangers seeking aid, *The Suppliant Women* demands a sympathetic and cosmopolitan willingness to welcome refugees. Aeschylus explored, in no uncertain terms, the anxiety Greeks sometimes felt when encountering non-Greeks; the Danaids repeatedly express the fear that xenophobia will lead the Argives to reject them. Pelasgos' first lines of the play even draw attention to their foreignness: "Who are these women? These strange women? / Rich foreign clothes and their hair so strange, / Not Greek women. Not our women" (17-18). The Danaids answer the king, "We don't look Greek. We know that's true. / But that doesn't mean we don't belong here" (18). They acknowledge their foreignness, but also put forward a claim to kinship, which will be discussed further momentarily. Throughout the play, the women and Danaos continually mention their foreign clothes, their skin tone, their accents, and their customs, worrying that these manifestations of Otherness will convince the Argives to reject their plea. However, audiences don't see a group of foreigners on the stage, they see women drawn from their local communities. Certainly, there is some willing suspension of disbelief, but the physical bodies of the Chorus performers are familiar—familiar in the directly etymological sense derived from the Latin *familiaris*, that is, of belonging to the family.

For audience members, seeing the stage filled with their wives, mothers, sisters, co-workers, neighbours, etc. arouses identification with the Chorus as representatives of the community, and arouses sympathy for refugees who are suddenly pictured as intimates. The Danaids strengthen these identifications through continual references to the Argives as family and to Argos as home. Right from the opening Choral ode, the Danaids, descendants of Io, call Argos their homeland.[8] They lay claim to the city-state:

[8] Hera turned Io into a cow and drove her out of Greece after Zeus fell in love with the unfortunate maiden. Hera's vengeance drove Io to Egypt. Among her lineage were the brothers Danaos and Aegyptos.

These are the fields which fed cow-Io

This is the pasture from which she was blown

So if we come here to seek asylum

We come as her children: this is our home. (13)

The Danaids invoke the right of kinship to justify their asylum claim when Pelasgos arrives. He asks who they are and why Argos should help, and they tell him, "Our story's simple: we're the children of Io, / Io of Argos: we're Greek, like you" (18). Again, for audience members, the actors desperately seeking protection are not actually foreigners, but the most intimate of compatriots. Seeing family members, friends, co-workers, etc. in the position of refugees begins building the psychological structures of empathy that will, in principle, make it easier for audience members to recognize the humanity of refugees arriving from the Middle East, North Africa, and elsewhere. This preparation to empathetically see the humanity of the Other is especially crucial in the era of Brexit.

Brexit, it is worth noting, was a democratic referendum. While that's not ironic in itself, it is ironic that Greig's and Gray's antidote to the Small England mentality which drove so much of the Leave vote is, in fact, more direct democracy. As we've already seen, the text of Greig's version emphasizes the direct participatory processes at the heart of Athenian government. But the performative choice to cast local women as the Chorus builds a reflective power into the show—a degree of self-control that enacts the power of a community to determine its own course. As Ramin Gray says, "Theatre works best when you have a city talking to itself, and so if you have a community chorus drawn from that city, you've really plumbed [*sic*] the people of the city into the show" ("Making of the Suppliant Women"). This echoes the communitarian role of crowds in ancient theatre, both of spectators and of Choruses, because Athenian Choruses were drawn from the citizenry itself. This shared bond strengthened a collective civic foundation because, as drama scholar Tor-Helge Allern says, "From whatever position, the Athenians shared a common tradition: they had all seen the performances, and most of them had danced as a part of the choir as young men" (159). By drawing Chorus members from local communities, Gray and Greig attempt to reinvigorate theatre as a collective space building a common tradition, a tradition facilitating direct democratic power rooted in the crowd of citizens itself.

Conclusion

The link between theatre and democracy is an old one. Theatre is a microcosm for democratic politics precisely because it puts people into a communal space where issues are

debated and outcomes assessed. Performance studies theorist Marvin Carlson points out that social relations inhere in the shared space of the theatre: "the act of theatre is a tripartite one, involving yourself, the performer, and the rest of the audience…bringing the experience inevitably into the realm of the political and the social" (198). In other words, the sociality of theatre—experiencing a play with others—can itself be a revolutionary political act, particularly in an age where, as we saw with *Iphigenia in Splott*, much of the dominant cultural imperative is toward isolation. Aristotle, in discussing democracy, points out the importance of communality and the value of a mass of politically engaged citizens: "the many, who are not as individuals excellent men, nevertheless can, when they have come together, be better than the few best people, not individually, but collectively" (1281^{a}41-1281^{b}.1). That act of being together to enjoy, to judge, to feel, has a positive communal value.

This may especially be true in performances or adaptations of Greek tragedy because in those plays remains the expansive political imaginary of the original democratic performances. While this democratic performance may be more obvious in Greig's *The Suppliant Women*, with its stage full of local Chorus performers, even a monologue play like *Iphigenia in Splott* continues to represent the openness of the tragedian's worldview. As Edith Hall puts it, tragedy "does give voice to those debarred by their gender or class from what *we* would call their 'democratic right' to free speech. It grants them temporarily in imagination the 'equality in the right to public speaking' (*isēgoria*) and the freedom to express opinion (*parrhesia*)" (126, original emphasis). So, while Effie remains isolated on stage, able to interact only with the audience that (for the most part) cannot respond, the very fact that is allowed to speak—despite her gender and class—gestures toward an open public rhetoric. As Ben Lawrence's review pointed out, women like Effie are more often spoken of mockingly than they speak for themselves.

The stakes are high for democracy today. Faith in democracy as such has been corroded, and the ideology is being challenged from both the right and the left. But rather than abandoning the democratic project, it is time to expand the scope of democratic power, particularly by empowering those who have been denied direct access to decision making authority. Paul Cartledge points out that many political and philosophical thinkers today are looking back to ancient Athens as a model for democratic reform, and that we must be cautious about what lessons we take and what aspects of Attic democracy we ignore (5). Both of the plays examined in this paper are part of this larger trend seeking to revitalize contemporary representative institutions on the model of Greek direct democracy, seeking to empower people within local communities, and seeking to re-establish the mutual relations of responsibility between the citizen and the *polis*. As Ramin Gray puts it in his director's note for *The Suppliant Women*,

"Given the current crisis of faith in our democratic institutions, in elections and referenda in particular, it's salutary to revisit the moment when these ideas were conceived and in the simplest of ways to start to renew our commitment to being together in a shared, civic space" (qtd. in Aeschylus n.p.). However, in returning to the earliest form of democratic collectivism—as seen through Aeschylus' and Euripides' drama—we should not be content either with the limitations of Athenian democracy or with the limits of modern representative democracy. We should seek the egalitarian ideal.

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