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# Ancient Greece and Contemporary Japan in Mishima Yukio's Theatre: *Niobe and The Decline and Fall of The Suzaku*

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## 三島由紀夫の戯曲における古代ギリシアと現代日本 — 『ニオベ』と『朱雀家の滅亡』 —

**要旨：**本稿は『ニオベ』と『朱雀家の滅亡』に焦点を当て、三島由紀夫の戯曲における古代ギリシアの役割について考察する。1951年に『群像』に掲載された『ニオベ』はニオベの神話、1967年に『文藝』に掲載された『朱雀家の滅亡』はヘラクレスの神話に基づいているが、両方の作品の背景に第二次世界大戦、アメリカ軍の占領、戦後日本の社会変動などの歴史的な出来事がある。これらの戯曲では、三島は古代ギリシアの神話や悲劇からインスピレーションを受ける一方、戦後日本における政治的な変化、社会的な転換、伝統的な価値観と新しい価値観の差異などに注目している。本稿の目的は、描写される現実と、演劇の枠組みとして設定された古代ギリシア神話の関係を明らかにすることである。神話の枠組みを借用することによって、三島は現在と過去の差異を強調し、戦後日本の混沌とした現実に理想的な秩序を再現することを試みていると考えられる。この秩序の再創造からはT・S・エリオットが提起した＜神話的方法＞が連想されるので、本稿は三島によるギリシア神話の改作とモダニズム文学の＜神話的方法＞を比較しつつ論じる。

**キーワード：**三島由紀夫、古代ギリシア神話、戯曲、ニオベ、朱雀家の滅亡

**Keywords:** Mishima Yukio, ancient Greek mythology, Japanese theatre, Niobe, The Decline and Fall of the Suzaku.

### 1. Introduction: Mishima's Approach to Greek Classics and to their Modern Adaptations.

In his prolific career as a writer and a playwright, Mishima Yukio (1925-1970) has skilfully combined tradition and modernity in works that establish cross-cultural bridges between Japanese and Western avant-gardes. Among the traditional elements incorporated in his literary and theatrical productions, Greek mythology, tragedy and literature play important roles: *Shishi* (*Lioness*, 1948), a novella based on Medea, *Niobe* (1951), a play inspired by Greek mythology, *Shiosai* (*The Sound of Waves*, 1954), a retelling of Longus' *Daphnis and Chloe*, *Nettaiju* (*Tropical Tree*, 1960), an adaptation of the *Oresteia*, *Purozerupīna*, a play inspired by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Proserpina*, *Suzakuke no metsubō* (*The Decline and*

*Fall of the Suzaku*, 1967), a play based on Euripides' *The Madness of Heracles*, and *Orfē* (Orpheus), an unfinished work inspired by Jean Cocteau's *Orphée*, among others. These adaptations mirror Mishima's fascination with ancient Greece, which occupies a special place among the countries he visits during the long journey across America and Europe as a special correspondent for the *Asahi Shimbun* (December 1951 – May 1952). In *Aporo no sakazuki* (*The Cup of Apollo*, 1952), the diary of his travel, he describes enthusiastically the ruins of the Parthenon in Athens and the oracle of Delphi. He admires the beauty of the Greek landscape, the magnificence of the ancient Greek civilization and its influence on European modern culture:

Greece is the land I love. When the airplane arrived from the Ionian Sea to the sky of the Corinth Canal, the setting sun was reflected on the mountains, and I saw the evening clouds shine like a golden Greek helmet in the Western sky. I called its name: Greece! A long time ago this name led Lord Byron, who was constantly in trouble with women, to the battlefield. It fostered the poetic imagination of Hölderlin, the Greek misanthrope, and gave courage to Octave, a character in Stendhal's novel *Armance*, when he was about to die (108).<sup>1)</sup>

During this visit to Greece, Mishima draws parallels between the Greek and the Japanese notions of beauty. He compares the temple of Zeus to the garden of the Ryōan-ji, because both of them have an asymmetrical structure. He argues that the beauty of Greek ruins largely comes for the viewer's need to recreate the structure of the temples by imagining the missing elements. He finds a parallel beauty in the suggestive power of traditional Japanese poetry.

Mishima is so fascinated with Greece that, after returning to Japan, he begins studying its ancient language under the guidance of Kure Shigeichi<sup>2)</sup> and writes several essays incorporating Greek classics. For instance, in "Girishia kokeki no fūmi" (*The Flavour of Ancient Greek Theatre*, 1954), he makes a comparison between Greek theatre and Japanese aesthetics, because neither of them is influenced by Christian morality. Moreover, in "Utsukushī shi" (*Beautiful Death*, 1967), he argues that the concept of beauty embedded in Greek poetry is similar to bushidō, the way of Japanese samurai: "Greek poets' concept of the ideal was to live beautifully and to die beautifully. Without doubt, this was also the ideal of our bushidō" (42). Here Mishima draws a subtle link between Japanese bushidō and the verses by Menander and Archilochus, who celebrate the 'beautiful death' of the young heroes. However, his words are tinged with melancholy, when he points out that the old bushidō values are no longer relevant

<sup>1)</sup> Page numbers refer to the Japanese text. In this article translations from the Japanese are mine, except where an English source is given in the notes.

<sup>2)</sup> Kure Shigeichi described his experience as Mishima's teacher in the following article: Kure Shigeichi (1972) "Mishima san to Girishia no koto", *Shinchō*, 69 (12), pp. 184-186.

in postwar Japanese society: "If it is difficult to live beautifully in the troublesome circumstances of contemporary Japan, it is even more difficult to die beautifully" (42).

These essays, together with the enthusiastic descriptions of Athens and Delphi in *The Cup of Apollo*, mirror Mishima's deep interest in ancient Greece, which constitutes a recurring element in his artistic production. At the same time, however, there is another factor that may have contributed to Mishima's fascination with classical repertoire: the enormous popularity of modern French theatre in the period between the 1940s and the 1960s, when playwrights and intellectuals such as Jean Anouilh, Jean Giraudoux, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus and Jean Cocteau wrote a considerable number of adaptations from Greek and Roman classics. Significantly, as pointed out by Amano Chisa in the essay "Mishima Yukio *Niobe* ron" (Discussion about Mishima's *Niobe*, 2001), *Antigone*, the first play by Jean Anouilh performed in Japan, was staged in Tokyo in June 1949, only two months before Mishima completed his final draft of *Niobe*. Notwithstanding the lack of evidence that *Antigone* had a direct influence on Mishima's play, it is remarkable that, in those years, modern French theatre fascinated many of the intellectuals who gravitated around Mishima. For instance, playwright Katō Michio, who was a member of the Bungakuza (the theatre company for which Mishima wrote most of his plays), regarded Giraudoux and Anouilh as models to undermine the realism of the so-called *Shingeki*, the new Japanese theatre inspired by Western performative techniques. He aimed at reproducing the "surreal world" created by French playwrights through the combination of classical plays and avant-garde theatre, as he wrote in the essays "Engeki no kokyō" (The Birthplace of Theatre, 1947) and "Jirōdō no sekai to Anuiyu no sekai" (The World of Giraudoux and Anouilh, 1948).

Like Katō, Mishima was interested in the works by French intellectuals and playwrights, and wrote about them in several essays. For example, in "Higeki no arika" (The State of Tragedy, 1949), he mentioned Anouilh, Giraudoux and Cocteau's approach to Greek tragedy and, in "Jan Kokutō no yuigon geki" (Jean Cocteau's Testamentary Play, 1962), he discussed the legacy of Jean Cocteau, who produced several works based on Greek classics, including *Antigone*, *Bacchus*, *Oedipus Rex*, *La Machine Infernale* and *Orphée*. However, in contrast to the aforementioned French writers, Mishima's aim was not to emphasise the surreal nature of classical elements in a modern context: whereas Anouilh's *Antigone* is set in a surreal dimension between ancient Greece and modernity, with only veiled references to the human tragedy of WWII,<sup>3)</sup> most of Mishima's adaptations of Greek classics take place in the historical background of modern Japan. In this context, as I will argue in the chapters that follow, Mishima borrows the motifs and the structure of Greek classics to expose the paradoxes and the sense of loss of postwar

<sup>3)</sup> In the final scene of *Antigone*, staged for the first time in Paris in 1944, there is an implicit reference to the absurdity of the violence of WWII: "Tous ceux qui avaient à mourir sont morts. Ceux qui croyaient une chose, et puis ceux qui croyaient le contraire – même ceux qui ne croyaient rien et qui se sont trouvés pris dans l'histoire sans y rien comprendre. [...] Et ceux qui vivent encore vont commencer tout doucement à les oublier" (Jean Anouilh, *Antigone*, Paris: La table ronde, 2008, p.123).

Japanese society.

Among Mishima's plays based on the classical repertoire, my analysis will focus on *Niobe* and *Suzakuke no Metsubō* (The Decline and Fall of the Suzaku) because they provide an interesting case study for understanding how he reworks Greek mythology and tragedy to represent Japanese modernity. Significantly, these plays are set in Japan during the 1940s: *Niobe* takes place in 1949, during the American occupation, whereas *Suzakuke no metsubō* is set in the years between the last air raids of the Allied Forces and the Japanese surrender. Both of them portray a period when Japan had to face important political and social changes, and when the traditional concept of "Japanese identity" was questioned by new cultural models. Against this historical background, Mishima's stage adaptations of the ancient classics highlight the gap between the old Japanese values and the chaotic postwar reality, by combining Greek tragedy, *Shingeki*, *Noh* and the Theatre of the Absurd.

## 2. Parody of Modern Japan in *Niobe*.

Mishima's fascination with Niobe, the protagonist of this play, is described in *Aporo no Sakazuki*, in the section where he reports his visit to the National Museum of Rome. Here, in the gallery dedicated to Greek sculpture, Mishima stops in front of the statue of Niobe, because he is struck by the dignity of her profound yet composed grief:

Actually, the sculptures from the ancient Greek period are those that move me most deeply and from which I cannot easily turn my glance away, regardless how long I look at them. The perfect beauty of Niobe and the tranquillity of her grief. [...] When I was in front of Venus Genitrix and Niobe, I was so moved that shivers went down my spine (127).<sup>4)</sup>

According to Greek mythology, Niobe is the daughter of Tantalus and the spouse of Amphion, king of Thebes. She gives birth to seven sons and seven daughters, but she loses all of them because she boasts that she has more children than Leto, the goddess of motherhood. As told by Apollodorus and Ovid, the goddess punishes Niobe's excessive pride (*hubris*) by sending Apollo and Artemis, her twins, to kill the queen's offspring: Apollo shoots arrows at Niobe's sons and Artemis at Niobe's daughters. In the *Metamorphoses*, the queen tries to save at least her youngest daughter, shielding her with her own body, but Artemis takes the girl's life in front of her mother's eyes. When Leto's revenge is accomplished, Amphion commits suicide out of desperation and Niobe weeps until she turns herself into a rock, from which the stream of her ceaseless tears springs out. Niobe's pride and terrible sufferings become the

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<sup>4)</sup> This work was first published in 1952. My quotations are from the following edition: Mishima Yukio, *Aporo no sakazuki*, Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1982.

main motifs of Mishima's stage adaptation, where the female protagonist witnesses the death of all her children. However, as a close reading of the script will point out, this play differs from the mythological subtext in several ways and employs Niobe's tragedy as a means to create an ironic divide between past and present.

Moving away from Thebes, the city where the mythological story takes place, Mishima's adaptation is set in postwar Tokyo and features three main characters: Nagao Daitokuji, a shrewd politician in his fifties, his wife, Sadako, and their young male secretary, Kurita. The three of them gather on the terrace of the hospital "S", where Mr. and Mrs. Daitokuji's youngest daughter, Tomoko, is being treated for an acute disease. Tomoko used to be the couple's youngest daughter, but now she is their only child, because her four brothers and sisters died from a mysterious illness, which evokes Leto's divine punishment. Like Niobe, Sadako watched her children die one after the other and now, in the hospital, she is desperately attempting to save her youngest daughter's life. However, the opening scene turns Niobe's tragic story into a farce: Nagao (the alter ego of Amphion) and his secretary Kurita are not worried for the dying Tomoko, but instead they talk about horse racing. Nagao confesses that he is not concerned about Tomoko because, in reality, she is not his daughter. He explains that, out of a philanthropic attitude (he uses ironically the term *hakuai shugisha*, 'philantropist'), Sadako has had five children with five different men, but he has pretended to be the legitimate father of all of them to avoid any scandals that could compromise his political career. Therefore, every time Sadako gave birth to a baby, he just commented sarcastically: "At least, even this time the baby is Japanese!" (88).<sup>5)</sup> His words create a striking contrast between Mishima's play and the mythological subtext: whereas the king of Thebes, in Ovid's story, commits suicide at the sight of his sons' corpses, Nagao keeps an ironic distance from the tragic destiny of his family members, because he feels like a puppet in a well-organized farce. In fact, he believes that his wife is rehearsing for the final 'tragic scene' (*shūtanba*), Tomoko's funeral, where she will be at the centre of the stage in the leading role of the devastated mother and he will be the passive spectator supporting the heroine— "I have always accepted the role of the spectator who consoles you in your tragic scene" (89).

Nagao's sarcastic comments unveil the narcissistic attitude at the core of Sadako's grief: she is not really worried for her daughter's life; rather, she uses the public display of her sufferings as a means to build up her image as an inconsolable, grieving mother. For this reason, she always walks to the hospital in bright, gaudy dresses, thinking that people will be impressed by the contrast between her usual apparel and her black mourning dress at Tomoko's funeral. Moreover, she puts on heavy make-up and uses a strong perfume to emphasise her devastated beauty—ironically, when she learns of her daughter's

<sup>5)</sup> Mishima Yukio, *Niobe* (1951), in *Mishima Yukio gikyoku zenshū*, Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1990, pp.84-101.

s desperate condition from the doctors, she seems overcome with grief and cries loudly, but afterwards she sits in front of a mirror and touches up her make-up for an hour. Her behaviour is far from the image of Niobe's dignified grief evoked in *Aporo no sakazuki*. On the contrary, she shows off her suffering because she wants to appear a superior woman who can endure a grief so tremendous that it could not be tolerated by anyone else. In doing so, she highlights the distance between herself and common people, stressing her privileged position. After all, she is a highborn lady, descended from the imperial family and is married to a powerful politician, so when her social prestige is undermined by her children's mysterious deaths, she turns her sorrow into a means to reaffirm her superiority.

I was a happy person. No woman was more envied than me, because I was beautiful, was related to the royal family through my mother's side, had a wonderful husband like you and was the mother of five children. Even now, I don't want to let go of any of these things. Every time one of my children dies, I gain a sadness in which no one can compare to me. (90)

The paradoxical implication of Sadako's plan is that, in order to reassert her superiority and transfigure herself into the 'beautiful, suffering mother' in the final scene, she should hope that her last living child dies. However, the "tragic ending" of the play turns out to be different from her expectations. When the characters gather after Tomoko's death, Kurita, who is Nagao's secretary and Sadako's secret lover, tries to console her by whispering: "It's all right, I'm here with you. You can still have another child" (101). However, Nagao overhears him and, wearing an expression between laughter and tears, he tells the spectators: "That's the tragic scene. That's the real tragic scene!" (101). In other words, the tragic aspect of the ending lies not so much in Tomoko's death, but rather in Sadako's inevitable defeat - both in achieving her goal of becoming the superior grieving mother and in the pathetic continuation of her schemes, with an uninterrupted cycle of new lovers and new children. In contrast to Ovid's story, where Niobe's suffering is sublimated by her metamorphosis (she becomes the spring of a perennial stream of tears), Sadako's grief sounds ridiculous.

In addition to the narcissistic nature of Sadako's suffering, there is another element that deprives Mishima's play of the aura of Niobe's myth: the love affair between the protagonist and Kurita, her husband's secretary. Kurita, who represents the young postwar generation of the 1940s, takes Sadako's money and spends it on other women. Moreover, he blames her for his own moral decadence, saying that she has seduced him with the ability of a "*gaichi no panpan*" (94), a foreign prostitute. His words evoke Japan's imperialistic dream, because the term *gaichi* (external territory) was used to indicate the Asian colonies, in contrast to the 'internal territory' (*naichi*) of the motherland. Also the word *panpan* has a strong historical connotation, as it refers especially to the prostitutes who worked for the US soldiers during the American occupation. For this reason, the comparison made by Kurita has a double effect: it

produces a stark contrast between the idealized, dignified figure of the suffering Niobe and the morally corrupted *panpan* and, at the same time, draws a parallel between the declining fortune of the queen of Thebes and the decay of postwar Japan, after the end of its imperialistic dream. Even the fact that Sadako cannot rise to the status of a tragic heroine like Niobe, appears to be the result of the changes undergone by modern Japan, where the old values have been forgotten and the ancient myths can only be revived in the form of a ridiculous farce.

The petty world that contrasts with mythological subtext of *Niobe* is correlated to the political reconstruction of Japan in the 1940s, as the opening scene of the play points out. In this scene Nagao, an astute politician who managed to outlive the political changes of Japan, explains that the newly established parliament is a place where politicians either quarrel or doze. Nagao himself is no exception; he admits that he has no intention to help his fellow citizens. His crude words unveil the contradictory aspects of the Japanese political system (the new Japanese constitution was enacted in 1947 under the influence of the American occupants, only two years before the events staged in this play), with its democratic ideals based on the concepts of the citizens' rights and duties. Echoing the principles of the new constitution, the word '*kenri*' (right) recurs often in the characters' dialogues, but it has an ironic overtone and ends up emphasising the protagonists' baseness. For instance, Nagao claims that, even though Tomoko is dying, he has the *right* to think about horse races. In another scene, when Sadako complains about the opportunism of the people surrounding her, her husband says that human beings have the *right* to mind their own interests. Finally, Sadako tells Kurita that he has not the *right* to interfere in her own private business and the secretary replies that she has not the *right* to be so narcissistic. The term *kenri*, continuously misused in their discourses, is deprived of its higher, idealistic meaning and becomes a metaphor for the moral decay of postwar Japan and its political class.

The motif of Japan's political decadence is also explored in the fifth scene, when the play is interrupted by an *aikyōgen* (a *kyōgen* functioning as a comic interlude during the representation of a *Noh*) that represents the visit of three politicians to the dying Tomoko—the term *aikyogen* follows the title "Fifth scene" (*daigoba*), in Mishima's script. The use of elements connected to a *Noh* play may seem out of place here, but it emphasises the function of *Niobe* as a parody. In fact, a comparison between its structure and that of a *Noh* play points out that Sadako, Kurita and Nagao could be regarded as parodies of the main actors of a *Noh* drama: Sadako, with her leading role, could be the *shite*, Kurita the *shite-tsure* (the actor who accompanies the *shite* and who corresponds to Sadako's lover, ironically), and Nagao the *waki*, for his role as a spectator of his wife's tragedy. Like in a *Noh*, the performance carried out by Nagao, his wife and their secretary is interrupted by a comic interlude before the epilogue. The politicians who enter the stage evoke the stereotyped characters of *kyōgen* because they are called simply "A", "B" and "C". They go to the hospital to pay a visit to Tomoko, but they are totally unconcerned



with the destiny of the girl, so they end up talking about trivial topics and, disregarding the gravity of the situation, make jokes about the girl's young age.<sup>6)</sup> The politicians' *aikyōgen* becomes even more grotesque when a chair breaks and one of them falls to the ground, because this incident is followed by an angry dispute that parodies parliamentary debates. At the end of it, they reach the conclusion that it would be inappropriate to provide public offices with resistant, good-quality chairs, because they could instil in the citizens the subversive idea that chairs are objects made to sit on.

The nonsensical discussions of Japan's ruling class, reminiscent of Eugene Ionesco's Theatre of the Absurd, have the effect of creating an implicit association between the condition of Japan, ruled by incompetent politicians, and Tomoko's terminal illness. Significantly, the girl, who is a central element in the play, never appears on the stage, not even when she dies. Her absent figure is symbolically replaced by the panorama of Tokyo, which dominates the scene and is often the topic of the characters' conversation. By taking the place of the agonizing Tomoko, the representation of Tokyo and of postwar Japan becomes thus the real protagonist of Mishima's play. While Tomoko is going to die, Tokyo has just been 'resurrected' from the war, at least according to what Nagao says at the beginning of the first scene: "Ah, what wonderful weather! [...] Now that I look at it, Tokyo has been reconstructed!" (84). However, at the end of the play, his statement proves to be fictitious and the situation of Tokyo resembles that of the dying Tomoko, because the political class that should lead Japan towards its rebirth is portrayed as a group of people who only act in their own personal interests. Even the Parliament seems to be only an illusion: from the hospital terrace, the protagonists see the House of Parliament but, finally, they discover that the building they were looking at was just a gas tank. The discovery that their vision of the Parliament is just a mirage mirrors the fictitious process of "postwar rebirth" promoted by the political class portrayed in this play.

### 3. *Suzakuke no metsubō*: Heracles' Shift from Sanity to Madness in the War Aftermath.

*Suzakuke no metsubō* (*The Decline and Fall of the Suzaku*, 1967), was written 16 years after *Niobe*, in a period when the post-Shingeki movement was gaining an increasing popularity among Japanese playwrights. Many of them drew inspiration from Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Antonin Artaud to create experimental, paradoxical plays that represented absurd situations. For instance, in 1966, only a year before *Suzakuke no metsubō* was staged by the Gekidan NLT in Kinokuniya Hall,

<sup>6)</sup> Their puns revolve around the term '*bancha*' (a cheap quality of tea). When Tomoko explains that she is sixteen years old (*jūrokusai*), the politicians say: "*Musume jūroku bancha mo debana*" (97). This joke parodies the proverb "*oni mo jūhachi bancha mo debana*", which draws a parallel between *bancha* tea and young girls: just as even *bancha* tea tastes good when fresh, even plain girls look beautiful when they are young. However, the secretary, who does not understand this pun, offers some tea to the guests. The term *bancha* in the politicians' nonsensical dialogues evokes for assonance the word '*chaban*' (farce), which hints at the paradoxes of the new Japanese government and recurs often in the script of *Niobe*.

Satō Makoto produced *Harō Hiro! Owaranai owari ni tsuite no sanshō* (Hallo, Hero! Three Episodes about the Unending Ending), a trilogy of plays based on Sophocles' *Antigone*. Among them, *Isumene* (Ismene, 1966) reworks the Greek tragedy to portray a world filled with disillusionment and dominated by American culture (there is a big Coca-Cola dispenser on the stage and all the characters, including Antigone and Oedipus, are addicted to it). In a context characterized by a wave of experimentalism in Japanese theatre, Mishima wrote a stage adaptation of Euripides' *The Madness of Heracles* and, at the same time, evoked the themes of the Theatre of the Absurd, by exploring the narrow divide between sanity and madness in postwar Japan.

In the Euripidean tragedy, Heracles returns to Thebes after a long journey in Hades and discovers that Lycus, who has usurped his power, plans to execute his wife Megara and his children. Heracles kills the usurper and saves his family, but the jealous Hera sends Lyssa to confuse his mind. As a consequence, the hero who was supposed to save his relatives' lives becomes a murderer, because he slaughters his sons and his wife, in a fit of madness. Finally Lyssa departs and Heracles realizes the atrocity of his actions. Taking inspiration from this tragedy, Mishima tries to reproduce its structure by dividing his play into four acts, as he explains in the essay "Suzakuke no metsubō ni tsuite (chūjitsu ni saibu wo...)": the first act (Spring) corresponds to Heracles' victory over Lycus, the second (Summer) to the death of Heracles' sons, the third (Autumn) to Megara's death, and the fourth (Winter) to the hero's final destiny, which is summarized with the expression "amor fati", used by Friedrich Nietzsche to indicate the *Übermensch's* calm acceptance of life events. Following this order, the four acts of *Suzakuke no metsubō* represent the victory of Marquis Suzaku Tsunetaka over Minister Tabuchi in Spring, the death of Tsunehiro, the marquis' son, in Summer, the death of Tsunehiro's mother under an American air raid in Autumn, and the protagonist's resignation to a life of decadence in Winter. These events are set against the historical background of the Second World War, with the resignation of First Minister Tōjō Hideki (he is evoked by the character of Minister Tabuchi), the Japanese defeat in Okinawa and the Allied air raids on Tokyo.

In this context, Tsunetaka's descent into madness is linked to his resolution to obey the Emperor by "making no move", <sup>7)</sup> which prevents him from saving his relatives' lives. Mishima explores the contradictory aspects of Tsunetaka's positions in the essay "Suzakuke no metsubō ni tsuite (chūjitsu ni saibu wo...)":

The theme of this play is an existentialist analysis of the spirit of *shōshō hikkin* [reverential obedience to the Emperor]. In other words, the axis of the drama lies in the way loyalty as a passive attitude involuntarily

<sup>7)</sup> In the second act, Tsunetaka says to his brother: "I am serving him [the Emperor] by doing nothing, by enduring it, making no move" (78). All the quotes from *Suzakuke no Metsubō* are from Satō Hirohaki's translation "The Decline and Fall of the Suzaku", in *My Friend Hitler and Other Plays* (2002).

drifts into loyalty as a kind of identification. The element corresponding to Heracles' madness is solitary loyalty as madness, or else fidelity as destruction" (131-132).

Moving from Mishima's considerations, many scholars have analysed the relation between the protagonists of this play and the Emperor, and have made parallels between *Suzakuke no Metsubō*, "Eirei no koe" (Voices of the Heroic Spirits, 1966), "Yūkoku" (Patriotism, 1961) and *Tooka no kiku* (Tenth-Day Chrysanthemums, 1961), because these works explore themes such as the loyalty to the Emperor, the sacrifice of those who died in the Emperor's name during the war and the existentialist questions of the survivors.<sup>8)</sup> While in no way denying that the examination of the Emperor's role hitherto carried out by the majority of scholars constitutes one of the key elements to understand *Suzakuke no metsubō*, my study shifts the focus of the analysis to the role of the mythological subtext in representing postwar Japan and in creating a cross-cultural dialogue between Japanese and Western literatures.

The main element that links this play to its mythological subtext is the motif of the hero's fall. The declining fortune of Heracles—from a hero to a lunatic murderer—is paralleled by the downfall of Marquis Suzaku, who becomes a penniless, crazy wretch by the end of the play. In the opening scene, he is represented as a powerful lord who gained the Emperor's favour and who forced his political enemy (Minister Tabuchi, the alter ego of Lycus) to resign. For this reason, he is compared to Heracles by his brother, Mitsuyasu: "He's smashed the usurper's palace with Herculean strength" (73). The marquis belongs to an aristocratic family devoted to the goddess Benten, who is so attached to the male members of the Suzaku clan that she makes their wives die prematurely (for her jealousy, she represents Hera). Also Tsunetaka's wife seems to be the victim of Benten's jealousy, because she dies soon after the wedding. After she passes away, the marquis conceives his only son, Tsunehiro, with his servant O-Rei, but he pretends that the baby is the child of his late wife. Following his aristocratic ideals, he never marries O-Rei and educates Tsunehiro to serve the Emperor and respect the traditional values of the Suzaku family. However, when his son enlists in the army and is posted to a Pacific island attacked by the Americans, the members of his family realise that to fight there will most certainly result in the young lord's death. In order to save the only male descendant of the Suzaku, both Mitsuyasu and O-Rei beg the marquis to ask for the intervention of a politician to change Tsunehiro's destination. However, the protagonist refuses to do it because he believes that it would put shame on his son and would damage the honour of the family. In light of his aristocratic values, the marquis thinks that it would be better for Tsunehiro to sacrifice his life and die for the Emperor than to live as a coward. As a consequence, his son sets off to war and dies as a kamikaze pilot.

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<sup>8)</sup> For further reference, see the analysis of *Suzakuke no Metsubō* in the works by Matsumoto Tooru, Yamanaka Takeshi, Nagao Kazuo and Sadoya Shigenobu, included in the Japanese bibliography.

Like in Euripides' tragedy, the horrible death of the protagonist's son takes place outside the stage. Whereas in *The Madness of Heracles*, a messenger gets on the stage and describes the children's slaughter, in Mishima's play Tsunehiro's death is announced by a telegram: "Ensign Suzaku Tsunehiro has been promoted by special decree to the rank of second lieutenant on account of his honourable death in battle" (93). As soon as she finds it, O-Rei holds the marquis responsible for her son's death and, in a fit of rage, pushes him out of the air-raid shelter during an Allied attack. Ironically, a bomb hits the shelter, killing O-Rei, but Benten shrine, where the protagonist takes refuge, is not damaged by the air raid. After the end of the war, in the fourth act, the marquis, like Heracles, witnesses the downturn of his fortunes and lives alone in the ruins of his palace. He is considered a poor lunatic by the villagers, who murmur that his strange ideas have caused the death of both O-Rei and Tsunehiro.

The protagonist's madness is a common feature in both Euripides' tragedy and Mishima's adaptation, but their approach to this theme is substantially different. In the Greek tragedy, madness is an external element that breaks into the 'natural' order of the world, which is restored as soon as Lyssa (the personification of madness) leaves the stage. On the other hand, in Mishima's play the marquis' craziness is the result of the gap between past and present: what was considered 'the normality' in the pre-war system of values becomes lunacy in modern Japan. Significantly, the downturn of Tsunetaka's fortune, from a respected lord to an insane wretch, is mirrored by the historical background chosen by Mishima for this adaptation, a period when the traditional order collapses. In the essay "Suzakuke no metsubō ni tsuite (kono shibai wa...)", the writer points out this issue and explains that two of his works based on Greek tragedy—*Suzakuke no metsubō* and *Shishi*, a literary adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*—are both set in the war aftermath, in the years when the old image of Japan vanished:

In 1948, soon after the defeat, I wrote a novella entitled *Lioness*, based on Euripides' *Medea*. Twenty years later, I am writing another work based on a Greek tragedy and set in the war aftermath. As far as I am concerned, the memories of that time have gradually attained a mythical dimension and [...] I cannot help referring to the state of mind of the 'collapsing world', which affected Japanese people at that time (139).

The mythical dimension mentioned by Mishima evokes the ideal in which the marquis continues to believe anachronistically: a world revolving around the figure of the Emperor and shaped by a well-defined order, similar to the melody of Benten's *biwa*. Following the rules of this world, Tsunetaka refuses to marry O-Rei and to ask the minister to change Tsunehiro's destination. However, after the Japanese surrender, the old system of values dissolves like a dream—as Tsunetaka says to his niece Ritsuko, "Illusion has gradually permeated reality, and we live in a world where we can't even be certain of tomorrow" (89). While the 'mythical' image of the old Japan crumbles, O-Rei tries to convince the

protagonist to adjust to the new reality<sup>9)</sup> but, like Don Quixote, he stubbornly sticks to an order that does not exist anymore:

Tsunetaka: We have what we call order in our society.

O-Rei: Go out in the garden, climb the mound, and look around.

Everywhere you look is a burned-out field. Do you call that order?

Tsunetaka: Things may burn and lose their forms, but you can't burn your heart. Order is in your heart. Tsunehiro died for the sake of the beautiful, invisible order.

O-Rei: For the sake of the order that prohibits a son from calling his mother Mother?

Tsunetaka: It is the order that you from the start agreed to and cooperated with. (101-102)

Like O-Rei, Mitsuyasu tries to explain to his brother that he has to come to terms with the idea that Japan has changed: the Emperor is selling his properties to foreign traders, the symbols of the nobility have been burnt, the aristocratic families have decayed and Japanese women, dressed like prostitutes, walk arm in arm with American soldiers. However, faced with the crude reality of postwar Japan, the marquis argues that the world has remained unchanged because, even though the photo negative has turned positive, the picture is still the same.

Mitsuyasu: You are as stubborn as ever, aren't you? When the times have already changed and everything has turned inside out like a glove.

Tsunetaka: It may be simply that the photo negative turned positive, that the picture remains the same. (107)

Even though he does not acknowledge the new order of Japanese society, Tsunetaka is seized by a sense of discomfort because "the Country of the Rising Sun has now become a country of tears" (108) and the past glory is nothing but a blurred memory — "Everything is gone. Great, illustrious power, honour, pride [...]. The best of this country, like burned trees, withered black, crumbled, and died out" (108). Therefore, whereas Heracles recovers his mental sanity and regrets what he did, Tsunetaka defends his 'madness' to the end, regardless of the reality surrounding him:

At the core of that madness was sincerity as transparent as a crystal. The blessing I had from it was that loss was not a loss, that even losing my own

<sup>9)</sup> In this play, O-Rei's practical vision of the world is juxtaposed to Tsunetaka's ideals. Significantly, in "Suzakuke no metsubō ni suite (kono shibai wa...)", Mishima points out that the opposition between male and female characters in this play reminds the opposition between the Marquis de Sade and his wife in *Madame de Sade*. Moving from these considerations, Arimoto Nobuko and Kurisu Mahito have analysed the difference between female and male characters in *Suzakuke no metsubō*, as well as their relation with the Emperor as a divinity (their essays are included in the bibliographic references).

son made me feel I gained something larger. My wings may have been cut, but being a bird was my madness, so on account of that madness I flew with airy lightness. What about now? You may say I've become normal. I don't know. I cannot possibly tell whether I am still mad or have become normal. The one thing I can tell is that at the center of this normalcy there is no sincerity, that even though this normalcy is splendidly equipped with wings, it never flies. Just like an ugly ostrich. I don't know about me, but you have all become ostriches. (105-106)

Tsunetaka's words exemplify how Heracles' myth is reworked to represent the decadence of contemporary Japan and the nostalgia for the past. Significantly, when Mishima explains the making of this play in the essay "Suzakuke no metsubō ni tsuite (kono shibai wa...)", he writes: "This play is tinged with my nostalgia [he uses the French word *nostalgie*]" (569). In this regard, Sugai Yukio<sup>10)</sup> aptly draws a parallel between Euripides and Mishima for their 'representation of decadence', and argues that Mishima portrays Japan's decay by retelling Euripides' tragedy, which was considered a corrupted, 'decadent' expression of Greek drama, in opposition to the canonicity of Aeschylus and Sophocles. Moving from the problematic aspects of human nature, on which Euripides' theatre places great emphasis, Mishima expands the scope of his representation to the contradictions and the problems of modern Japan. At the same time, his adaptation of Euripides' tragedy should be positioned against a wider, cross-cultural literary background: Mishima's rewriting of the Greek classics as a means to explore the contradictory, absurd aspects of postwar reality may be paralleled to the role of the classics in the works by Jean-Paul Sartre, Jean Cocteau, and Albert Camus, to whom he refers in several essays. For instance, in "Shōsetsuka no kyōka", he points out that the existentialist literary and theatrical productions by Sartre and Camus have a clear tendency towards classicism, and explains that this was a specific feature of the emerging artistic movements in Europe at that time (Mishima wrote this essay in 1955). From this perspective, when he points out that the main motif *Suzakuke no metsubō* is "an existentialist analysis" of the obedience to the Emperor,<sup>11)</sup> his words draw the attention to the Emperor's controversial role in the war aftermath but, at the same time, they also evoke the problematic reality portrayed by the existentialist writers and playwrights. Significantly, the tragic figure of Tsunetaka, who follows the Emperor's orders to the extent that he sticks to values deprived of any meaning, is reminiscent of Camus' Sisyphus. As Camus explains in "The Myth of Sisyphus", this Greek hero is condemned by the gods to perform a meaningless task: he is ordered to ceaselessly roll a stone to the top of a mountain,

<sup>10)</sup> For further reference, see Sugai Yukio (1976) "Suzakuke no metsubō: shinshikaku ni yoru sakuin kaisetsu", *Kokubungaku kaishaku to kanshō* 41 (2), Gyōseidō, pp.140-143.

<sup>11)</sup> "Suzakuke no metsubō ni tsuite (Chūjitsu ni saibu wo...)", p.131. Italics mine.

whence the stone would fall back, over and over again. Like Sisyphus, Tsunetaka continues to perform a contradictory, apparently meaningless task (serving the Emperor by doing no move and by watching his relatives die), and the absurdity of his tragic condition may be regarded as the paradigm of the absurd fate of modern man.

Tsunetaka's nonsensical situation is paralleled by the contradictory aspects of postwar Japan portrayed in *Suzakuke no metsubō*, where there is no place for a reassuring happy ending: whereas *The Madness of Heracles* ends with Theseus consoling the hero and inviting him to Athens, the last scene of *Suzakuke no metsubō* features Ritsuko who reproaches the marquis for having sacrificed his relatives' lives in the name of his illusions. Faced with his niece's practical vision of the world, the protagonist keeps silent, leaving all her questions unanswered. Thus the play ends with Ritsuko shouting at the marquis: 'Die. Destroy yourself! Destroy yourself now, on this spot!' (111). Her angry words—*horobinasai*,<sup>12)</sup> which literally means 'extinguish yourself!'—seem to foreshadow not only the end of the Suzaku clan, but also that of traditional Japan.

#### 4. Conclusion

In *Niobe* and in *Suzakuke no metsubō*, Mishima adapts motifs from the classical repertoire by setting Greek myths in postwar Japan. In the former, he rewrites the myth of Niobe in a humorous, satirical play, whereas in the latter he employs Euripides' drama and the myth of Heracles to emphasise the contradictory situation of a tragic hero who cannot give up traditional values. Both of these plays rework motifs from Greek myths and tragedies to represent the shifting reality of postwar Japan, portraying the opportunistic *nouveau riche*, the reckless politicians, the drastic changes in people's mentality and the tragic destiny of those who cannot adapt to the new social order. In the cross-cultural dialogue between ancient stories and modern retellings, the sense of distance conveyed by the Greek subtext, reminiscent of a far-away classical past, amplifies the yearning for a world that has been lost at the end of the war and emphasises the unbridgeable gap between traditional and contemporary Japan. Another important implication of Mishima's adaptations is that, in his superimposing of images of ancient Greek mythology on pre-war Japanese reality, he sublimates the Japanese past in a mythical dimension. The mythological repertoire frames the image of traditional Japan—with its aristocratic ideals and its order revolving around the Emperor—with a nostalgic aura and, at the same time, sheds light on the contradictions of postwar society. As a result, even the fragmented and chaotic portrayal of contemporary Japan acquires a new shape and significance, in light of the Greek subtext.

<sup>12)</sup> The implications of Ritsuko's words are discussed in Ōkubo Tsuneo's essay "Horobi no bigaku wo gekika" (Dramatization of the Aesthetics of Dissolution, 1967).

From this point of view, Mishima's approach to the ancient Greek repertoire might be compared to James Joyce's mythical method, theorized by T.S. Eliot in "Ulysses, Order and Myth" :

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. [...] It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. [...] Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward that order and form which Mr. Aldington so earnestly desires (481).

Like in Joyce's novel, the reference to Greek mythology in *Niobe* and *Suzakuke no metsubō* becomes a framework that orders the reality of modern Japan and brings together the scattered fragments of its past. Moreover, Mishima's representation of the decay of traditional Japan may be paralleled to the motif of the fragmentation and the decay of Western culture conveyed by the works of Modernist writers such as Joyce and T. S. Eliot. However, while the author of *Ulysses* reworks a foundational myth from his own culture, Mishima appropriates the canon of another culture to reconfigure the representation of Japan. In other words, he uses the classical repertoire foundational to Western culture to evoke the vanishing image of traditional Japan during a period when it was threatened by new, Westernized models (significantly, both the plays are set in the 1940s, the years of the Japanese defeat, the American occupation and the increasing 'Westernization' of Japanese society). From this point of view, Mishima's retelling of Greek classics may appear paradoxical, because in essays like "Americajin no nihon shinwa" (translated by Donald Keene as "Japan: The Cherished Myths", 1961) he criticizes the loss of the old traditions and the excessive Americanization of his country, but in these plays he employs Western myths to revive the Japanese past and shed new light on postwar reality. I would argue that this apparent contradiction reveals the protean essence of Mishima's artistic production, which adapts and reworks a wide range of motifs from Japanese and European literary traditions. In approaching a versatile and multi-talented writer like Mishima, it is necessary to move beyond labels and crystallized definitions, because his plays mirror his ambivalent position between Japan and the West, tradition and avant-garde: he skilfully combines stories from the Greek classics, the motif of nostalgia for the Japanese past, French playwrights' experimentalism and elements of *Noh* theatre, thus establishing a fascinating dialogue between different cultures.



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