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Misogyny in Greek Tragedy and Its Solutions Presented in Modern Performances

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Abstract: The number of performing arts based on ancient Greek tragedies has continued to increase around the world after WWII. However, some works have misogynistic expressions because they were written more than 2,500 years ago in a male-dominated society. This study, therefore, aimed to identify the trends of the contemporary performances of Greek tragedy and to analyze changes in representations of gender in them through books, viewing of performances, and interviews with researchers and directors. In Japan, there were almost no Greek tragedies directed by women until 1990, and even today there are only a small number of performances by women directors, compared to the western countries. In the case of the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus which has derogatory expressions for women, many adaptations with gender themes have been created since the 1980s in the West. On the other hand, in Japan, there were few performances, and moreover some of them reinforced gender stereotypes. Based on this research, I finally produced a short video of the *Oresteia* with gender themes. This experience revealed the difficulty of creating the adaptation of Greek tragedies in Japan due to the low awareness and the difficulty of gender representation which there is no correct answer.

Introduction

How Greek tragedies can be performed in our times? I will focus particularly on how plays that encompass scornful expressions toward women may be adapted or recreated. This paper is divided into three parts. First, I will impart essential information on Greek tragedy and the context of my research. Second, I will elucidate gender representations in *The Oresteia* and offer discrete examples of modern performances of this trilogy across the world. Finally, I will introduce my adapted video of *The Oresteia*.

The Context of My Research and Essential Information on Greek Tragedy

To first delineate my research methodology, I investigated this topic last year for Osaka University’s Research Incentive Program. Initially, I scrutinized books and articles. Subsequently, I interviewed a professor and some directors of theatrical companies. Finally, I created the film, *The Oresteia* and experienced firsthand the difficulties of adapting the trilogy to contemporary sensibilities.

I would now like to offer fundamental information on the ancient Greek tragedy. This form of theater was performed in Athens. It peaked around the 5th century BC. Only 32 tragedies based primarily on mythologies and written by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides remain extant, along with 11 comedies written by Aristophanes. These works were written around 2500 years ago but are still performed across the globe. A glance at the column reveals the changes in the number of performances of Greek tragedies since the onset of the 20th century. This quantum increased after the second world war, not only in Western countries but also in Japan.

The Oresteia and its Gender Representation

Let me move on to specific themes of The Oresteia and its gender representation. I focus in this study on The Oresteia, written by Aeschylus. The trio of plays was originally performed at the annual Dionysia festival in 458BC and denotes the only surviving work representing the perfect form of a trilogy. To offer a synopsis, the first part is named Agamemnon, after the king of Argos, who returns from the Trojan war with Cassandra as a war trophy. His wife Clytemnestra kills them to revenge Agamemnon's earlier sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia. She and her lover Aegisthus then declare themselves rulers. Orestes, the son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, returns to his country with his best friend Pylades in The Libation Bearers, the second part of the trilogy. The duo meets Orestes's sister, Electra, and conspires with her. They avenge their father by killing their mother and Aegisthus in accordance with Apollo's commands. In Eumenides, the third part of the trilogy, Orestes is accused by the Erinyes, the three goddesses of vengeance, of killing his mother. However, Apollo and Athena help him and forgive his crimes at the court.

I will also illuminate why I focus on feminism and gender representation in Greek tragedy. First, the social status of women was much lower than the standing of men in ancient Greece, especially in Athens. Also, Greek tragedy was a masculine art because the playwrights, actors, and almost all of the audiences were male. Thus, many female characters were written from formulaic perspectives, and gender-related expressions included contempt for women. For example, in The Oresteia, women are stereotypically described as possessing a negative disposition. Please look at this table, which displays the oppositional conceptions of women and men in The Oresteia. In particular, the portrayal of the Erinyes as women influenced the image of revengeful females who appeared in many pieces of literature and the other arts after this play.

Second, Apollo employs the misogynistic sophistry that "the woman you call the mother of the child is not the parents."...." This remark convinces Athene, and Orestes is therefore proven innocent. Third, the entire narrative symbolizes the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy as analyzed by feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir and Kate Millett.

Many directors, including women and primarily in Europe, began to adapt The Oresteia from the standpoint of the awareness of feminism and gender relations after the development and influence of the feminist movement. I will skip the details, but in some works, they began to cognize how to describe women and indicated the problems of patriarchy. Conversely, most performances in Japan are envisioned by male directors, and there are very few enactments that incorporate the themes of gender and feminism. In Japan. There are seven performances based on the Oresteia directed by women.

I will now examine the contents of The Oresteia in Japan. First, the most serious problem concerns the exaggeration of stereotypes based on modern sense. For example, Clytemnestra's maternal, revengeful, jealous, and horrible aspects are overemphasized in modern renditions, exceeding the original depiction. Moreover, a recent performance portrayed her feeling sexually aroused as she kills her husband,

Agamemnon. Second, many directors remove Apollo's line, "the woman you call the mother of the child is not the parents...." Third, they do not portray the problems of a patriarchal society.

I would like to highlight performances devised by female directors. Although their numbers are few and proportionally low, they have directed the trilogy with an awareness of gender and feminism, focusing on female characters, reversing the roles of men and women, and suggestively overturning male-dominated society. Without going into details, some plays directed by women also disrupt gender norms, for instance, by portraying the king's son Orestes as a queer character.

Practice: Adaptation and Video Shooting

I attempted to adapt *The Oresteia* into a film based on my studies. The cast and crew comprised members of four distinct drama and musical clubs, and the movie was shot by a film club.

The primary theme of my film is gender and feminism. I tried to indicate and raise awareness of the problems of patriarchy through this drama. I enumerate some points that I contemplated. First, I cast only females to overturn the tradition of all-male casts of ancient Greece. Also, my film focused on four women characters. Second, I tackle the problematic line, "the woman you call the mother of the child is not the parents..." by emphasizing it with the awareness of gender issues. As long as Orestes speaks this line and claims his innocence, the world of *The Oresteia* continues to loop without him. Subsequently, I imply that Orestes is also the victim of patriarchy.

Finally, I will articulate the four difficulties of adapting Greek tragedy for contemporary audiences in Japan. First, many people in Japan are unaware of the plot of *The Oresteia*, so it is difficult to state my intentions. To resolve this problem, I inserted a synopsis of the trilogy before introducing the original part. Second, it is difficult to utilize a chorus. Traditionally, a large chorus would stay on stage, sing, and dance. However, since this adaptation is video-based, I could omit most of the chorus, and instead, I fashioned them as the present-day tweet. Third, the behaviors of some female characters are inconsistent with feminism. For example, Clytemnestra and Electra are strong women, but they are simultaneously dependant on other male characters such as Aegisthus and Orestes. I could not resolve these contradictions. There is no perfect answer to gender representation, so I needed to carefully select the costumes and messages. For example, Clytemnestra's costume can be divided into two categories: the dress and long hair underscore the image of ordinary women and housewives, while pants and short hair emphasize the image of strength. I chose pants, but the fact that women need to wear costumes of men to be persons of power is also problematic. Moreover, I repeated the line, "the woman you call the mother of the child is not the parents..." to indicate the problem of patriarchy, but I was anxious that it could be inferred as an argument contrary to my intentions.

Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to summarize the major points of my presentation. The number of contemporary productions of Greek tragedy is increasing, but there are few female directors and productions in Japan that display an awareness of gender representation issues. For example, productions of *The Oresteia* exhibit problematic depictions based on misogyny as well as maternal clichés and gender stereotypes. Thus, I created a video-based work with a gendered theme. I focused on the female characters of *The Oresteia* and clearly revealed the patriarchal society of the work. Through this experience, I understood the difficulties of adapting Greek tragedy for audiences in Japan, where it is not well known. I also apprehended the problems of gender representation, for which there is no right answer. If you are interested in watching my short film on *The Oresteia*, you can view it on YouTube using the keywords “*Oresteia Osaka*.”

Before ending, I would like to broach the subject of the influence of COVID-19 on my research. Of course, I faced some difficulties. Access to some libraries was restricted, and I changed my plans to stage a performance to making a short film to avoid the risk of contracting the virus. On the other hand, almost all events were canceled, so I could concentrate on my research. Moreover, I could interview famous directors and a scholar via ZOOM. After this situation alleviates, I would like to visit the UK because there are specialized centers on the modern performance of Greek tragedies, and I am interested in adaptations created by Caryl Churchill.

