

CHAPTER XIII

Decolonising Thoas

In 1855, one year into the Crimean War, a North American discussion of the history of the Crimea penetrated straight to the heart of the relationship between *Iphigenia in Tauris* and Athenian colonialism. The journalist suggested that it was the establishment of Black Sea colonies that led the tragedians ‘to make use of a Tauric legend in the plays they offered to Athenian audiences, as Shakespeare made a comedy from the Bermudas, and as a playwright of ours, if we had any, would be glad of a Kanza tradition’. He asks his readers to understand the relationship of Euripides’ Taurians to their Athenian audiences in the same terms as Shakespeare’s Caliban in *The Tempest* to the English who had colonized Bermuda in 1609, or the native Kanza Sioux in the (newly created) state of Kansas to the reader of the Boston-based literary journal. The Kanza Sioux had notoriously proved resistant to all the attempts of Methodist missionaries to make them live in permanent housing and convert to Christianity.

The author of the article was correct. Euripides’ *IT* is very nearly a definitive text in the archive of colonial literature. This chapter will explore the radical revisions that 20th- and 21st-century authors and directors have performed upon the text in order to make it speak to a world struggling to recover from centuries of European domination of the planet. For *IT* ticks almost all the boxes in the conceptual repertoire of postcolonial theory associated with the work of the Palestinian Edward Said, and the Indians Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha. Thoas and his Taurians, who blithely call themselves ‘barbarians’, are straightforward projections of the ethnocentric Greek

imagination. The individual Taurian characters, the herdsman, Thoas and his henchman, who delivers the second ‘messenger speech’, are little more than ventriloquised, animated puppets designed to make the Greeks’ intelligence and emotional range appear to the best advantage. Very little effort has been put into inventing a semblance of an authentic subjectivity or interiority, into imagining events from their perspective, or into seeing them as fully formed individuals with families and pasts. Thoas may be a king but he seems to have no ancestry. The community is scarcely outlined, let alone given social relations, productive working lives, institutions, rituals or customs beyond human sacrifice, impalement, and cattle farming. Moreover, as this book has shown, the post-Euripidean adaptations of the story until the late 18th century became steadily more damning of the population of Tauris. This begins with the development of the trope of the ‘admiring barbarian’ who praises the loyal friendship of the Greek men, and the first thoroughly dead Taurians of Roman art and literature; it matures with Toante, the megalomaniac bully of Rucellai’s *Orestes* and is consummated in the Ottomanised tyrant of Gluck’s opera.

The first, even if thoroughly compromised, partial and tentative step towards ‘decolonising’ Thoas and his countrymen was taken by Goethe when he allowed them to keep the cult image of Diana. In post-apartheid South Africa, Goethe’s *Iphigenie auf Tauris* has even been used in multiracial attempts to come to terms with the apartheid legacy. But it is not until very much later than Goethe’s play, in 1924, when the movement towards challenging the story’s Hellenocentric perspective began to make rapid and spectacular progress, with the *Ifigenia Cruel* of the Mexican writer Alfonso Reyes. For the first time in the entire reception of Euripides’ tragedy, Iphigenia—Reyes’

Ifigenia--refuses to return to Greece at all, preferring to remain with the community that has adopted her. Perhaps this radical revision could only have come about in the work of a poet whose country was itself the ultimate result of a colonial invasion of an indigenous culture by Europeans—the formerly Aztec territory incorporated into the Spanish Empire in the 16th century under the name ‘New Spain’.

Reyes was part of a group of Mexican writers known as the ‘1898 generation’, who self-consciously attempted to create a national literature in the wake of Spain’s loss of its last colonies in Cuba, Guam, and the Philippines. He was deeply influenced by the example of nation-building through literature set by Weimar classicism, especially by Goethe. His choice of theme for his only attempt at a drama based on a Greek tragedy is as much a homage to Goethe as it is to Euripides. Reyes’ *Ifigenia Cruel* certainly become one of the founding texts of Mexican literature as well as Mexican Modernism and of appropriations of ancient Greek literature in the Spanish language. Usually regarded as his finest achievement, it has itself acquired the status of a classic work. It was probably first performed in 1934 in the context of celebrations of Mexican theatre by Mexican authors; subsequent performances have taken in several other Latin American theatres and campuses, recently, for example, in Peru. *Ifigenia Cruel* has been transformed into an opera by Leandro Espinosa (1976). It also reverberates in later Latin American literature on the themes of exile and separation, of which Reyes had bitter personal experience. His father was a prominent politician who was killed in 1913 while attempting a *coup d’etat*. Reyes fled, abandoning Mexico and its Civil War (1910-1917), one of the bloodiest and most terrifying the world has ever seen.

After a brief stint as a diplomat in France, Reyes arrived in Spain in 1914. He stayed in Madrid, studying classical literature and working as a literary translator and commentator until 1924. Then he spent time as a diplomat, first in Paris and then in Argentina and Brazil. He did not go back to his Mexican homeland until 1938. He had discovered that ‘home’ and ‘return’ are ambivalent words, especially since he found his intellectual and spiritual home in Spain, the ancient mother country of his New World place of origin. His sense of ethnic and cultural hybridity was however even more complex than this. By the time he wrote *Ifigenia Cruel*, Reyes had embarked on his project to give voice to the ‘Aztec muse’, by according Mexican literature autochthonous roots that ran parallel to, and merged with, those that had grown in Spain. These had already been given powerful articulation in 1917 in his *Visión de Anáhuac*, where Aztecs and conquistadors encounter one another for the first time. *Ifigenia*’s religion therefore has reverberations of ancient Mesoamerican culture before it was destroyed by Christian imperialism.

As a young man of twenty years old, supposed to be studying law in Mexico City, Reyes learned Greek in his attic room and began to read the ancient tragedies, beginning with those about Orestes and Electra. One of his more important early critical works is a comparison of the three plays about Electra by each of the Greek tragedians, a study which takes as its starting-point Nietzsche’s explication in *The Birth of Tragedy* of the collective origins of the chorus. Reyes’ other favourite work of ancient literature was the *Aeneid*. He also translated *The Ebb Tide* of Robert Louis Stevenson (*La Resaca*), in which a decrepit old Englishman reads the *Aeneid* on a South Sea island. The idea of the shipwreck, or the journey overseas that ends in crisis, struck him as an important symbol

for Mexicans, whose nation had been ‘founded in sorrow and shipwreck’, so it was perhaps inevitable that he would be drawn towards Euripides’ ‘travel tragedy’ about Orestes and Iphigenia in Tauris.

His *Ifigenia Cruel* is a lyrical and partly surrealist dramatic poem in five acts, of which the first four are short, building up to the climactic fifth act in which Ifigenia makes her decision to stay. It becomes clear in the opening speech, delivered by Reyes’ Freud-influenced heroine, that she has suppressed all memories of her life before her arrival in Tauris, where her eyes were first ‘ripped open’, and she felt herself to be a strange animal ‘between a forest, a temple and the sea,’ at the feet of the goddess. The goddess animated her, her divine will pouring through Ifigenia’s mortal joints and limbs; when Ifigenia she performs her sacrifices, knife in hand, she becomes one with the body of the goddess. The chorus venerate her, admire her beauty, long to touch her but may not: more than anything they admire her strength when she twists her arms in her zeal to strangle a man:

You prefer the enraged victim, overcome in the open space

so that Artemis breaths the breath of the entrails!

O bloody and fierce thing!

In the brief second act, the Taurian cowherd appears to report the arrival of two men, one of whom is clearly mad. This dialogue is important in that it depicts Taurian society as a semi-idealised pastoral utopia, for all its brutal rituals: Ifigenia asks what the cowherd thought he was doing, substituting oars for staves, nets with slings, and songs with curses:

O, you peaceful fathers of quiet agricultural land,
experts in the flute and melody and custodians of the ewe!
What have you to do with terror, anchors and ships,
with fist-fights and shouts of rage?

This evocation of the normally Arcadian atmosphere provides a contrast with the noisy, violent entrance of Orestes at the beginning of Act III. He is raving and deluded. Ifigenia criticizes the Greeks' impulse to sail all the routes the sea can take them, and asks why their own cities and farmlands are not enough for them. In a voice which invites comparison with the experience of the Mesoamerican cultures invaded by the Spanish conquistadors, she asks why they are surprised to find themselves condemned without pardon after challenging the very limits of nature and coming to a civilization more ancient than they can ever imagine:

You are strong men for the Virgin.
Civilization was established long before your infancy.
History began long ago.

Reyes had certainly studied *The Golden Bough*, in which there is a good deal of information on the human sacrifices in Mexico which so obsessed the conquistadors. His Orestes is enraged into a furious assault on the defiant priestess: 'Recognize your master!' He begins to tell her that Apollo has sent him to find the temple of Artemis, and

the names of these two divinities stimulate in Ifigenia a fit of recovered memory. She begs the stranger to stay silent because she thinks she knows a mark on his neck (a detail suggested by the Halai Araphenides ritual that Euripides' Athena decrees) and his blue eyes: 'I do now wish to know—O my cowardly heart—who I am'.

Toas appears opportunely to attend the sacrifice, and Ifigenia tells him that the men have brought with them her forgotten name. He accepts that they should be allowed to speak: the rest of the drama, the long fifth act, stages Reyes' analysis of the tensions underlying the ancient Greek myth of the reciprocal violence in the house of Atreus. His solution to the problem is a rather mystical fusion of essentialist feminism and Nietzschean anthropology. It requires Ifigenia to remain with the Taurians and the violent Orestes, constrained by a family destiny he does not know how to refuse, return to Greece empty-handed. In resisting the instinct to attribute responsibility to others for one's circumstances and condition, and to punish them for it, Ifigenia is enacting Nietzsche's recommendations in *Will to Power*, which argues that the revenge drive has removed all the innocence from human existence and replaced it with resentment, nihilism and repression. In order to effect the final separation of his Nietzschean Ifigenia from the revenge cycle in which her father had forced her to participate, Reyes polarizes the positions which she and Orestes respectively articulate. He introduces two passages of poetry from two other ancient Greek texts in order to articulate these positions.

The first is Orestes' performance of a revisionist Hesiodic cosmogony, in which the deeds of violence done to Ouranos by Cronos, Tantalus to Pelops, and Thyestes' children by Atreus, are traced down to the violence done to Agamemnon and then to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. These names produce a flood of memories in Ifigenia, and

with Orestes prompting her, she relives the nightmarish scene at Aulis and recognizes him as the beloved little boy she left behind there. But she reaches the critical point in her recovered memory as she relives the intense love her mother had offered her. She says that what she flees is not the goddess but memory:

I flee because I feel that I am impaled to the ground by a hundred crimes.

I flee from memory and from my history like a mare who tries to evade her shadow.

Orestes constrains her violently as she recalls the details of arriving at the camp in Aulis. Here Reyes introduces a series of several speeches in which Ifigenia uses material from *Iphigenia in Aulis*. In a version of her mother Clytemnestra's great appeal to Agamemnon at *IA* (1146-84), Reyes' Ifigenia says to her brother at the culmination of this sequence,

You snatched me from my first husband and I was torn from his arms;

you smashed my first son against the ground/.../

I was modest and sober in your palace.

Three daughters and one son were given to you.

So you are sent forth from your land and home by foreign aggression:

Do you really want the little boy to weep for the death of Iphigenia?

Orestes tells Ifigenia that Apollo orders her to return to Mycenae, marry (the husband's identity is not specified), and produce children, but Ifigenia is adamant that her body is

overwhelmingly polluted by the crimes of Mycenae, which continue ‘boiling’ in her entrails; her milk would nurture only snakes and incest. Matters have reached crisis point, but Orestes and Pylades are spared when the chorus ask Toas for clemency, and he allows the Greeks to leave. For the first time in the history of Euripides’ *IT*, the king of Tauris is allowed to teach the Greeks a moral lesson:

Temperate behavior is the answer. Firm kindness
is the basis of the family and the security of the state:
forgiveness, letting go of resentment.

The drama ends at sunset, with the chorus celebrating the departure of the Greeks, of whom their venerated Taurian space and landscape are finally free again.

My prosaic account of *Ifigenia Cruel* fails utterly to convey how Reyes uses stress, word order and punctuation to align the aural effect and the form with psychological evolution of his dramatic poem. The choral passages use unexpected emphases that are rare in Spanish, suggesting ancient hymn-like chants which help to bring the new, free Ifigenia into being. The colometry is marked by a good deal of end-stopping, which often supports verbs in the imperative, propelling the verses on, in a manner akin to a procession, ‘like a series of steps’. Most of the play is written in a free verse, with lines of anything between seven and thirteen syllables--often eleven, in which it is difficult to produce melodious Spanish phrases, underlining the struggle in which the characters are engaged as they pursue their freedom from destiny. Ifigenia has released herself from her past in an act of profound self-determination which involves rejecting

her physical homeland in favour of her spiritual one. The poem's exceptional formal and emotional power is a result of its grounding, as Reyes fully acknowledged, in his own experience of violence, bereavement, and exile:

Using the scant gift that was conceded to us in the measure of our strength, we tried to free ourselves of the anguish that such an experience left with us, projecting it upon the artistic sky, discharging it in a colloquy of shadows.

Reyes' Tauris, where after her struggle his Ifigenia elects to stay, is a remarkable place. Its inhabitants regard themselves as ancient and civilized; they are a pastoral people, expert in music and song. They do not travel away from their own land and do not understand why the Greeks do. They are not violent, and besides their ritual sacrifices of those who invade their country, are a peaceful and gentle people. Their king even feels pity for the plight of the Greeks – 'I have learned', he says, 'to weep for other people's sufferings'—and listens politely to their case. One of the aspects of life in Spain that Reyes most prized was the relative freedom of speech and respect of privacy that he enjoyed there. Yet, for all the striking rehabilitation of the Taurians in Reyes' poem, his Thoas remains an ill-defined presence, overshadowed in psychological interest by Ifigenia and her brother. Thinking about what 20th-century writers have done—or not done—with Thoas and the Taurians indeed offers the most direct route into understanding how this play has resonated during the period of movements in opposition to European colonialism and its legacy across the planet.

With Yannis Ritsos, the ethnic encounter scarcely features at all in his response to the Euripidean text. Thoas and the Taurians disappear from the story almost entirely, and the Black Sea Iphigenia finally comes truly home, to the south-east Peloponnese. A major figure in 20th-century Greek literature, Ritsos was born and raised, like Iphigenia, into a rich family in the ancient district of Laconia, although a little further south than her, in Monemvasia. The autobiographical element in his response to *IT* is expressed not through its heroine, as in Reyes' drama, but through the insertion into her story of a second younger brother.

Since his death in 1990, Ritsos has become a national hero, although during his life he was regarded by many as a dangerous revolutionary. He never did abandon the socialist politics he acquired in his youth—in 1931 he joined the Greek Communist Party and wrote poetry to inspire first the international working-class movement and then the Greek resistance. After what he felt was the equivalent of incarceration in hospital with tuberculosis between 1927 and 1931, he endured a great deal of persecution by the dictator Metaxas, and in 1948 was actually imprisoned for four years. If there are Taurian barbarians in his poem, they are the sinister medical or prison bureaucrats who used to supervise Iphigenia and Orestes incessantly, entering their room 'at any hour, autocratic, unknown men'; they would 'occupy the settee, placing their large hats on their knees' and await their captives' certain deaths. Ritsos' later poetry turned increasingly to ancient myth and literature, especially ancient Greek tragedy, in order to express a very personal vision of his country's tragic 20th-century history. 'The return of Iphigenia' was conceived as the last in a series of poetic soliloquies, each framed by 'scene-setting' sections of prose narrative, in which he fused the story of the house of Atreus at the time

of the Trojan war with the experiences of members of his own family; the physical environment in the poem, with its armchairs, piano, and ice-cream cones, is recognizably that of postwar Greece. For Yannis, world wars and civil war had compounded the private devastation caused by the early deaths of his oldest brother and mother from tuberculosis, his father's breakdown and commitment to mental hospital, and the lost of the family fortune. The first poem in this series, 'The Dead House', had been published in 1959; the Atridae monologues were published together in *The Fourth Dimension* in 1972.

When the infamous military junta took power in April 1967, Ritsos was soon arrested once again, and imprisoned in a series of island prison camps. Sick with suspected cancer, in 1970 he was allowed to go into 'internal exile' on Samos and (under heavy surveillance) travel to and from Athens for treatment. It was during this dark time that he composed 'The Return of Iphigenia', which is dated 'Samos—Athens—Samos November 1971-August 1972'. His own agonizing experience, while he wrote the poem, of exile, journeys and returns endured at a time when he faced the fear of imminent death, lends this last monologue in the series a special intensity. Indeed, the significance of this response to Euripides' tragedy is that it is one of only a very few artworks that have tried to imagine what the longed-for homecoming might actually have looked like, and the answer is bleak:

We have returned, or so we say,
and we hardly know where we have returned from, or to. We are suspended
in between two unknown points. Don't droop your head—
we'll escape, both you and I.

Iphigenia and her brother have still not broken away from their captivity. They are still stranded, miserably, in a state of limbo. The sense of ineluctable oppression, completely unalleviated by their official ‘escape’ from the Taurians, coaxes the reader into realizing the impossibility of happy endings and identifying the true barbarism as an integral part of contemporary Greek domestic politics and culture. In the narrative section at the end, we are told that ‘the woman’ will take the image to Brauron where ‘the ceremonial rite will take place... And, in fact, it is Sunday’. The formal language and the passive voice, as well as the Christian resonances, subtly remind the reader of the Junta’s close relationship with the Greek Orthodox Church. The image, in fact, is sinister--a mysterious ‘charred log’, which ‘somewhat resembles the torso of a woman, without arms and legs’. Religion in this socialist/humanist version is not the issue: rather, it is powerlessness in the face of other people’s manipulation of religious ritual.

But the political dimension of *The Fourth Dimension* poems is only one part of a dense, allusive text in which intensely introspective and melancholy first-person subjectivities range through memories, fragments of dialogue and narration. The overwhelming preoccupations are the vice-like grip of the dead on the present, and the psychological alienation by which trauma estranges individuals from people they once loved. Pylades, Orestes’ former ‘faithful comrade’, has split up with them and disappeared, ‘perhaps because he predicted the alteration in the tone of their relationships’, and because he found ‘the isolated feeling of guilt’ completely unendurable. The guilt and alienation caused by their mutual survival of danger and

catastrophe, in Iphigenia's words, sound as though they symbolise the isolation of every human being:

How *alone* we are, my god, and what strangers to one another, despite
our shared fate.

The amount of time I talk just about myself, for all that I know
you are much further from any goal, totally cut off
from any sense of continuity, there in the place where words disappear...

Ritsos' introspective monologues of disappointment and alienation were not written for performance by actors, but his popularity has inevitably led to attempts to realize them theatrically. One of the largest Greek communities in the world lives in Australia, and Ritsos' 'Return of Iphigenia' was recently adapted for performance in New South Wales. The Teleia Theatre Company performed it, along with another Ritsos monologue 'Orestes', under the title *The Comeback* at the 2007 Greek Festival of Sydney. This Greek/Australian production is one expression of the special resonance that Euripides' Black Sea tragedy seems to have held in connection with the Antipodes. Classical scholars, for example, have investigated the Australian native people's experience of British colonization after Captain James Cook took possession of it as a *terra nullius* in 1770, in attempts to throw light on the way that ancient Greek colonization was experienced by the indigenous people.

When Robert Browning wrote 'Waring' in 1842, a poem regretting the recent emigration to New Zealand of Alfred Domett, a close friend and would-be writer, he

muses comically on the various inhospitable places where ‘Waring’ might have ended up. Figuring his friend as Iphigenia, he asks whether s/he has gone, for example,

To Dian's fane at Taurica,
Where now a captive priestess, she alway
Mingles her tender grave Hellenic speech
With theirs, tuned to the hailstone-beaten beach
As pours some pigeon, from the myrrhy lands
Rapt by the whirlblast to fierce Scythian strands
Where breed the swallows, her melodious cry
Amid their barbarous twitter!
In Russia? Never! Spain were fitter!

Amongst Australians, one critic has even identified what he has called the ‘Iphigenia complex’ in colonial writing by women. An important female painter, Jean Bellette (1908-1991), in 1944 won the Sulman Prize, awarded annually in New South Wales for ‘the best subject painting, genre painting or mural project by an Australian artist’, with her *Iphigenia in Tauris*. In a wide, dusty, open landscape, where the horizon is set at an almost infinite distance and it takes concentration to distinguish sea from sky or cliff from cloud, it is the horizontal axis which predominates. Only the upper torsos of the horsemen and two horses’ heads, perhaps suggested by Thoas’ call for horses near the end of *IT* (1423), connect the shadowed earth to the lighter elements of water and air in the upper section. The horsemen are dressed in ways that suggest the Australian present,

rather than Greek antiquity; they belong to a tradition of art and literature which represented Australian landscapes and cattle drovers in a mythical idiom. These feature frequently in the atmospheric paintings of John Glover, Elioth Gruner, Conrad Martens and Arthur Streeton, for example, and the poetry of Henry Lawson, notably his much-loved ‘The Hoseman on the Skyline’ (1906):

He never rides in starlight
Nor underneath the moon,
But often in the distant
And dazzling haze of noon.
The sad Australian sunset
(Too sad for pen or tongue)
Has often seen him riding
Out where the night was young.

In the foreground of Bellette’s landscape sits a solitary, naked, timeless woman—a statuesque Iphigenia partly fused with the image of Artemis, perhaps; the direction of her gaze and the slightly raised arms signal isolation and helplessness. On the left, two women with minimal drapes gesture towards her—perhaps the chorus; on the right two men, one naked and one in a long classical tunic, are engaged in communication with the women, while another group of men behind them are more interested in the horsemen.

The scene is conceived in the quintessentially ‘classical modernist’ terms favoured in Australia between the world wars, although less romantically than in the

works of some of the men in the ‘Sydney Group’ with which Bellette is associated and which included her husband Paul Haefliger; at the Westminster School of Art in England, and in France and Italy, Bellette had received a classical art training oriented towards the earlier European tradition, especially Greco-Roman sculpture and Byzantine art as well as Medieval and Renaissance masterpieces. She also studied the French literary symbolism of Stéphane Mallarmé and is clearly influenced by the classicism of Cézanne, Maillol, de Chirico and Picasso. She favoured neoclassical, heroic figures, was repeatedly drawn to ancient Greek myth, and determinedly pursued the goals of compositional balance and order, but her work reflects her responses to the unique spaces and light of Australia and is infused with a distinctive melancholy. The psychological contours of Greek tragedy are monumentalized and fused with traditional Australian landscape painting and her very personal experience of the Australian landscape, creating ‘complex forms of personal and national allegory’.

It is in Australia, moreover, that *Iphigenia in Tauris* has inspired the first ever ‘iPad Opera’, *Exile* by Helen Gifford, to a libretto by Richard Meredith, which is available on the Internet as a permanent podcast audio-recording. This can be overlaid by an iPad application, launched in December 2010, which sends the libretto flowing in surtitles across generative graphics that are strikingly different each time; touching the screen produces writhing tracks of blood and other random, unsettling, and only half-identifiable images (for example, a temple) and textures. Gifford was drawn to the Greek tragedy partly because of the resonances she felt it had for Australia’s particular social history. She had written her ‘one-woman’ opera for soprano and pre-recorded chorus in the early 1980s. She had experimented in it with the use of unconventional percussion

and instrumentation, including a mandolin, sliding chromatic flute solos (which open the piece), and raw clarinet sounds, which she felt conjured up an atmosphere appropriate for the ancient Greek world. It is an atmospheric piece, which explores Iphigenia's psychological state, her dream, her memories, her fears. There are no Taurians, and no Thoas, just as there is no Orestes, but the music, especially the pre-recorded choral sections, suggests the mysterious voices of the past re-echoing in the alien background, the harsh context of Iphigenia's exile.

Despite a few private recordings which sat subsequently in archives, *Exile* did not reach the mainstream public until June 2010, when it was brought to life by David Young and his company Chamber Made Opera at the Iwaki Auditorium in Melbourne [FIG. XIII.4]. The recording of that performance was broadcast in November 2010 in instalments on ABC radio. This production relocated Tauris to Point Nepean on the Victoria Coast, which was singularly appropriate for several reasons. It was the site of an infamous quarantine station, built in 1852, and in 1999 redeployed to house refugees from Kosovo. The dangerous coastline has seen terrible disasters, including the wreck of the SS Cheviot in 1887, when 35 men died; Harold Holt, the incumbent Prime Minister, responsible for expanding Australia's role in the Vietnam War, drowned there in 1967. Even more importantly for an opera about the ancient goddess who oversaw women's reproductive processes, these craggy limestone cliffs were also for thousands of years the site of an ancient Aboriginal settlement (there are 70 registered Aboriginal archaeological sites within the Point Nepean National Park), where the women of the Boonerwung People used to go to give birth.

Remote areas of Australia haunted by the ancient presence of the Aboriginal population has also produced, in Louis Nowra's play *The Golden Age* (1985), an extremely important response to *IT* in which the literary descendants of the Taurians, the strange people encountered by the figures equivalent to Orestes and Pylades, have finally and emphatically become the tragic heroes. In this 'distinctively post-colonial' vision of national history, 'tragedy, romance and farce can collide in magic realist mode...where the traumas of the past erupt into the present to be rehearsed, replayed and refigured.' *The Golden Age* has, deservedly, become a cornerstone of the Australian theatre repertoire. Set in 1939-45, it is inspired by the true story of a small community descended from convicts deported to Australia, who got lost in the outback of Tasmania in the mid-19th century. Through the trauma inflicted on their ancestors, lack of cultural roots to hold onto, and inbreeding, they developed a strange dialect and become increasingly prone to hereditary abnormalities. In 1939 they were discovered and put in sanatoria by the Australian government, who were terrified of the 'evidence' they might present to Nazi eugenicists. They all died, most of them of tuberculosis. In this play this strange community in part symbolizes the experience of aboriginal Australians after the European colonisation of Australia; only a handful are left, including the 'Iphigenia' figure Betsheb, and the young autistic boy Stef of whom she takes great sisterly care, although her own brother has recently died.

The Golden Age was regarded at the time as an oblique approach to the subject of the extermination of native Australian culture by the Europeans, and led directly to the play which addresses it explicitly, Nowra's adaptation of Xavier Herbert's novel *Capricornia*, commissioned for the 1988 bicentenary of the foundation of Sydney and

New South Wales. Nowra had for years researched early attempts by British individuals to learn the indigenous languages of Australia, especially Lieutenant William Dawes, who around 1790 learned Eora, the language spoken around Sydney Cove, from a teenage girl named Patyegarang, and whose notebooks are the best record of the richness of the language, which died out in the early 19th century.

Betsheb's community in *The Golden Age* is 'discovered' in the Tasmanian outback by two young Australian men, Peter Archer and Francis Morris. Francis and Betsheb form a close bond. The last few members of this 'lost tribe' are committed to a sanatorium and only Betsheb survives. Peter and Francis both fight in Europe, but in the end return, and Francis takes Betsheb back to her remote place of origin, where the couple awaits an uncertain future. The action moves between the Tasmanian outback and Hobart, the chief city of Tasmania, with a short section in Berlin. *IT* and *King Lear* provide two crucial intertexts, plays embedded within the frame play. *Lear* has apparently been handed down, in a burlesque form, by memory from a deported actor in the original fugitive community. The savage heath of Shakespeare's elemental tragedy represents the Tasmanian forest as well as the prison-like sanatorium. But these are also associated with the Tauric backwater where Iphigenia is discovered.

To the elite colonial community, Nowra, superficially at least, assigns not Shakespeare but Greek tragedy. Framing the play are two productions of *IT* set outside a 'Greek' temple in the neoclassical garden of a prosperous white Hobart family, 'elite' performances done for charity by Dr and Mrs Archer. Dr and Mrs Archer were historical figures in Hobart, and Louis Nowra tells me that they really did put on such productions

of Greek plays, including *IT*, in their garden. In the play these performances represent the new Australian immigrant community desperately trying to import ‘old’ European, colonial culture into a frightening new environment. Later in the play, the temple replica is associated with a statue of Frederick the Great in Berlin, riddled with bullet holes during World War II, thus linking the era of 19th and 20th-century European imperialism directly with the ancient Greek tragedy. The ‘high’ culture represented by the garden and the Greek plays is also contrasted in social terms with the lower-class Roman Catholic background from which Francis comes; as someone who has risen socially, he feels a different kind of rootlessness and exile—or *outcastin’*, the key word of the play.

The play opens with Elizabeth Archer delivering the part of Iphigenia’s opening monologue which describes her dream, after this stage direction:

Hobart, 1939. A garden. It is a hot Australian night full of the sounds of cicadas and crickets. ELIZABETH ARCHER, a middle-aged woman, stands in front of a small, crumbling Greek temple. She wears a copy of an ancient Greek dress. For a moment it seems we are in ancient Greece, but she is playing Iphigenia from Iphigenia in Tauris.

After the monologue, Nowra adapts the play so that Orestes (played by Mrs Archer’s husband William) appears immediately, and explains that he is ‘an outcast’ hated by the gods. Elizabeth/Iphigenia, who has not yet identified the new victim she must prepare for sacrifice, responds to William/Orestes: her speech turns out to resonate throughout the play. It allegorically describes the plight of British deportees to Australia in the 19th

century, of William Archer himself, and symbolically of the aboriginal population of Australia and the victims of World War II:

I too am far from home and live only to perform these dark rites which are so savage as not to be sung.... I now have nothing left to lose. Cruelty has overtaken me, possessed me. You are first to sail here in a long time but you will never return home. You will die in pain and lie in an unmarked grave.

By the end of the play almost all the lost tribe are dead, World War II is over, a German has been shot to death on stage, and William Archer has died as an indirect result of contact with the lost tribe and his insatiable desire to control them. The audience also has reason to think that Francis and Betsheb have died in a suicide pact, although this will turn out not to be the case.

In the penultimate scene, a second performance of *IT* takes place, with Peter Archer now assuming what seems to be his 'dynastic duty', playing Orestes to his mother's Iphigenia. This time it is the recognition scene: 'Orestes' says to 'Iphigenia' that he has come 'to steal the statue of Artemis' and that he is optimistic that they shall escape: 'I see the strands of fate entwining themselves. Lady, I think we shall reach home!' This leads into the final scene, when we discover that Betsheb and Francis have actually not died, but returned to her homeland in the wild part of south-western Tasmania. The play does indeed enact a strange type of escape and homecoming, as Nowra's uprooted working-class substitute for Orestes accompanies his avatar of the aboriginal Australians, Betsheb/Iphigenia, back to her home territory permanently. Francis acknowledges that he, the Archers and the Australian government were

responsible for destroying her entire tribe. Peter arrives, to say that they are mad and have no hope of survival: he insists that Betsheb's people could never have survived any longer in the outback, either:

They were pathetic remnants of what was probably an even more pathetic collection of people. They were like those Aboriginal tribes that withered away because their culture wasn't strong enough. It happens in nature, in human civilizations, one big animal swallows a little one.

But Francis refuses to leave and the play ends with him and Betsheb, who is delighted, facing an uncertain future. Francis' eventual 'recognition' of the true nature of Betsheb and her inherited culture, along with the power of love, becomes the vital instrument of their psychological survival. Betsheb and Francis represent the sister and brother peoples of Australia and Tasmania who need to unite and work together. Different human cultures, it is implied, are just separated siblings, doomed to enact violence on one another until they recognize the closeness of their true natal bond.

There are other subtle ways in which Nowra relates the main plot of the play to the 'inset' performances of Euripides' play, besides the obvious resonances of the journey into the interior made by the two young friends, and their encounter with the strange tribe. The central character is the tragic figure of Betsheb, an infertile and emotionally desperate young woman, forced to become the repository of all the memories and language of the tribe when all the others die. In her closeness to the natural world and the spirit world she believes in, she is like an indigenous Australian (which indeed she is, since she was born there). But in her awareness of her family's tragic history and her

isolation she shares much with the Black Sea Iphigenia. She does get released from her enforced duty in the Hobart asylum of presiding over ‘scientific’ rituals of medicalisation which ‘sacrifice’ her own kin. In a sense she does ‘escape’ from confinement and imposed barbarism. *The Golden Age* also shares with *IT* the background of a cataclysmic international war. Indeed, it uses the ‘other’ world of the lost tribe to critique the violence and horror of the ‘civilised’ world during World War II. Francis becomes addicted to violence and somewhat crazed while fighting in Berlin: that is, he becomes more and more like Orestes.

In the second decade of the 21st century, there are signs that the Black Sea Iphigenia is about to reassume her ancient and 18th-century position at the heart of the world of theatre. On 29th April 2011, near Lublin, south-eastern Poland, the Association of Theatrical Practices ‘Gardzienice’ gave the first public performance of their ‘work in progress’ *Ifigenia w Taurydzie*, directed by the centre’s founder and artistic director Włodzimierz Staniewski. As ever with this experimental theatre company, the pace is frantic, the movement incessant, the performance styles inspired by ongoing ethno-musicological researches and interactions, creating extraordinary vocal effects and physical gestures achieved with passionate commitment and discipline by Staniewski’s remarkable actors. The work will change with every single performance over the years, as the other two Euripidean plays in the company’s repertoire—*Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Electra*--are still evolving. But the fundamental theatrical concept melds ancient Greek iconography in striking ways with eastern European—especially Polish and Georgian—Christianity. On the screen above the action on the upper level, photographs of statues of Artemis, including a version of the many-breasted Ephesian Artemis, were at the

premiere interspersed with the medieval traditional rites still performed for the ancient ‘Black Madonna of Częstochowa’, who is a national symbol in Poland, and certainly its most revered religious icon. Staniewski made this connection with ancient rites of the Polish Virgin without being aware that Voltaire had suggested the same parallel to Catherine the Great 240 years previously, when encouraging her to conquer and enlighten a kingdom that covered all the superstitious and backward peoples from Roman Catholic Poland to the Muslim Crimea.

There was a good deal of duality in Staniewski’s *mise-en-scène*, centred on the pair of Greek men, who performed much of their dialogue in white masks with heavily pointed sign language accompanying their words. The atmosphere as the audience were welcomed by the actors into the performance space was deceptively serene, as the mellifluous recorded voice of Greek scholar Armand d’Angour resonated around the room, reciting Euripidean verse in its original language. But the play’s opening violently disrupted this serenity, with Ifigenia split into her voice—in an extraordinary vocal expression of pain and terror from Agnieszka Mendel—and her physical presence. The immeasurably vulnerable body of Dorota Kołodziej lay at the front, naked and cowering in a harsh spotlight. The clothes were of medieval shape and in earthy reds and browns, complementing the wooden spinning machines worked with explosive vigour while Iphigenia imagined the festivals in Greece where women weave robes for the statues of goddesses. The upper level of the set was reminiscent of the ancient theatre, painted to frame the action which took place there with the temple pillars on the ‘Louvre’ *IT* vase. Thoas was a brooding presence; three repellent skulls dangled from the roof of the lower level, and semi-continuous but ill-defined activities in the recesses of the lower level kept

the tension running high. The narrative was aided by eclectic techniques such as the shadow-puppet arrival of the Greeks' ship (inspired by Odysseus' ship on ancient vases), and sequences performed in ancient Greek.

The breathtaking ending had Athena take over the upper space, triumphantly performing the splits like a statue on a neoclassical pediment, and bringing together a hammer and a sickle, with her artfully curved arms held aloft, in a bittersweet enactment of the false 'happy ending' promised equally by Soviet communism and Euripides' inorganic *dea ex machina*. But the show was stolen by the leaping arrival of a troupe of young Georgian sword-dancers of such dynamic energy, signifying the ritual shaping of horrendous violence, their clashing weapons scraping perilously close to their young male bodies, encased in the traditional breeches, boots and tunics which are emblazoned with the cross of that most martial of Christian heroes, St. George.

Amongst other things, this chapter has argued that Euripides' *IT* can serve as an inspirational vehicle for thinking about the violence of colonialism, even though it is almost impossible to stage it without irony or self-conscious critique of its ethnocentric premise in a world struggling to legitimize its claim to being 'postcolonial'. The difficulties it presents were most clearly illustrated in the case of an *IT* specifically produced to celebrate the original arrival of Europeans in America. On May 7th 1992, the Greek Theater of New York, which had been established in 1979, opened its new production at LA MAMA theater, billed as 'the official gift from Greece and the Greek American community to the United States on the occasion of the Christopher Columbus Quincentennial.' The production was financially disastrous and heralded the demise of the whole Greek Theater of New York enterprise (it has since been relaunched). Directed

by Yannis Houvardas, who has since risen to the very top of his profession in Greece as the Artistic Director of the National Theatre, this production failed to please many Greek Americans precisely because it was perceived as highly disrespectful to the very idea of the ‘legacy’ of classical Greek theatre. The text was regarded as being too freely adapted from the translation of Richard Lattimore in order to dramatize Houvardas’ own ‘intriguing ideas about cultural confrontation’. The dazzling white set evoked a mental-hospital ward in which eight separate Iphigenias and no chorus tried to recover their terrifying pasts through working with dreams. Houvardas was accused of losing the ‘best elements’ in the play—the power of the letter scene and ‘the excitement of the great escape’. Greek Americans did not want, apparently, to have their historic contribution to the building of the United States celebrated by a psychotic heroine suffering from a split personality disorder.

This debacle only underlined the impossibility of a non-ironic or non-revisionist staging of *IT* in a world that has learned better to understand the relationship of narrative fictions to the history of European colonialism. But the future looks brighter for *IT* now than at any time since the 18th century. The poet Anne Carson has translated the play for the newly revised Chicago series of translations of Greek tragedy. Her translation, which will appear in 2012, is likely to make the play an appealing choice for performance. In Britain, Tony Harrison is working on a new play which adapts *IT* and is set at Sevastopol during the Crimean War. He will undoubtedly tackle the theme of imperialism in his own inimitable manner. It may therefore be that a sequel to my book will be required one day soon, in order to document Iphigenia’s continuing adventures in Tauris during the second decade of the third millennium. As one expert on Aristotle’s *Poetics* has eloquently put it,

The plot of the *Iphigenia in Tauris* surely is, in its Aristotelian essentials, universally tragic and significant. What matters most profoundly and fundamentally for our existence as human beings is whether we, like Iphigenia, will recognize our brothers in time to stop killing them. The rest, as Aristotle puts it, is episode.

As we arrive at the end our adventures with *Iphigenia in Tauris*, Euripides' Black Sea tragedy, it has emerged that its relative obscurity in the twentieth century was a most unusual exception to its importance and high profile in many preceding eras. Part of the problem, indeed, may have been the abundance of evidence in some of the files in the play's archive—those marked 'south Italian vases', 'Roman sarcophagi', 'Italian operas' 'Crimean war', or 'performance history of Goethe's *Iphigenie*', for example. The documentation in some of these cases is so immense that it has perhaps prevented less foolhardy scholars than myself from trying to understand the play's cultural stamina transhistorically. But my approach has at least revealed that the factors contributing to the play's prominence in most or all periods are similar--the attraction of its adventure plot set on a faraway coast, its generic elasticity, the trio of heroic compatriots, the theme of friendship, the brother-sister bond, and the implication that psychological catastrophe can eventually be surmounted.

Yet in the ancient reception of the play the single most significant factor is without doubt its nature as the play about the early history of the Artemis cult, one of the central pillars of pagan polytheism for many centuries. The most important aspect of its

reception since the discovery of the manuscript L 32.2 in Byzantine Thessaloniki, where Artemis was not worshipped, on the other hand, has been rather different: it has been the relationship between the Greeks and the Taurians—the meaning of ethnic and national difference, of colonial and imperial thinking, of superstition and enlightenment, of savagery and civilisation. Ultimately, the character who explains the post-Renaissance world's repeated return to this enigmatic drama is not Artemis, nor Iphigenia nor Orestes, but Thoas, King of the lost tribe of the Taurians, god-fearing and fleet of foot.