

## **The Migrant Muse: Greek Drama as Feminist Window on American Identity 1900-1925**

**Edith Hall (KCL)**

### **The Quest for a New Muse**

Just before the academic rediscovery of ancient Greek drama in performance in the 1880s, Walt Whitman appealed for a new form of poetry to replace worn-out classicism, in ‘Song of the exposition’ (1871):

Come, Muse, migrate from Greece and Ionia;

Cross out, please, those immensely overpaid accounts.

That matter of Troy, and Achilles’ wrath, and Eneas’, Odysseus’ wanderings;

Place ‘Removed’ and ‘To Let’ on the rocks of your snowy Parnassus...

For know a better, fresher, busier sphere – a wide, untried domain, awaits, demands you.

But what, precisely, would be the nature of the Muse’s fresher, busier, untried North American domain? If she was to migrate from Greece and Ionia, how was she to adapt herself to a new destination far from her original home? This chapter looks at some ways in which American Modernist feminists used the Muse of Greek drama in the reconfiguration of American identity.

Fifty years later, on July 7th 1921, Calvin Coolidge, Vice-President of the USA, addressed the American Classical League at UP in Philadelphia. Despite the tumultuous history

of the intervening decades, he still defended the American tradition of classical education, even while confessing his desire for a distinctively American identity:

We do not wish to be Greek. We do not wish to be Roman. We have a great desire to be supremely American. That purpose we know we can accomplish by continuing the process which has made us Americans.<sup>1</sup>

The process that had made Americans ‘American’, according to Coolidge, was the same study of ancient Greece and Rome which had made Europe European. The question, then, to which Coolidge had no answer, was how American identity could be forged without the new, fresh American input—however conceived—for which Whitman had already been calling half a century before.

By the time Coolidge delivered that address, several women had discovered that appreciation of ancient Greek drama could help them analyse alternative constituents of ‘America’ with little bearing on classical culture. These included the feminist perspective of the liberated western and mid-western woman; the evanescent pre-Christian world of the Native American; the contestation of capitalism by an increasingly organised labour movement; and the technological revolution, especially the invention of aviation—even Isadora Duncan said that she could not perform her upwardly directed dance, rooted in muscles from deep in the solar plexus, without placing a motor in her soul.<sup>2</sup> Besides Duncan, three other Hellenophile women were particularly influential: Hilda Doolittle, Willa Cather and Susan Glaspell, who sometimes worked in inextricable collaboration with her husband, George Cram Cook. In their work—dance, lyric poetry, fiction, drama—Greek theatre contributed to the creation of a new Modernist cultural identity for the twentieth-century American citizen.

The ancient texts whose dead weight Whitman had identified as preventing American innovation were epic poems—the *Iliad*, *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*. Classical epic had indeed long

been associated with the project of European imperialism, as Quint demonstrated in *Epic and Empire* (1993). But the significant Greeks from the 1880s onwards are less the epic poets than the dramatists. Greek drama was instrumental in creating in the USA ‘the explosive energy that made the early twentieth-century world modern’.<sup>3</sup> Greek drama tinges the light refracted through several surfaces of the prism of American Modernist identity—primitivism, ritual, technology, and the critique of militarism and capitalism. It helps to think about Modernism in America less as a set of phenomena—the typewriter, the aeroplane, the Great War—but as a holistic culture--‘a constellation of related ideas, beliefs, values and modes of perception.’<sup>4</sup> This constellation was itself a response to ‘American Victorianism’, which had been based on its own modes of perception, including the adulation of traditional Classical education, represented by the masculine ‘sign’ of Epic, as Whitman was aware. The Victorians yearned to keep the concepts of ‘the human’ and ‘civilisation’ distinct from ‘the animal’ and ‘barbarism’. They used religion and culture to maintaining this distinction, as well as those separating male from female, white from black, or genteel from labouring-class. Modernism contested all these dichotomies, proposing that religion could be a sign of atavistic reaction and could lead to bloody terror, that the symbol systems of primitive art might be superior to realism, and that women could do almost everything of which they had long been assumed incapable.<sup>5</sup>

The ancient plays which were performed or informed new works in this era were mostly those with female protagonists or women in the title—*Iphigenia in Tauris*, *Trojan Women*, *Medea*, *Antigone*, and *Lysistrata*, *Assemblywomen*, *Women at the Thesmophoria*. This is partly because the significant Americans *responding* to the Greeks in this period are often women. Women’s response to Greek theatre made possible the emergence of a distinctive ‘indigenous’ reading of the ancient plays which threatened to sever the aesthetic umbilical cord which had tied American dramatic Hellenism to Europe. But the presence of Greek drama in

this crucible of social and cultural change is often disguised or inexplicit, since it is as connected with aesthetic form as with plot content.

The epic genre from which Whitman wanted liberation had also always been seen as masculine, attracting few female translators.<sup>6</sup> This generic gendering contrasted with the perceived femininity of classical tragedy, for example in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century tradition of adapting Euripidean plays into sentimental neoclassical ‘She-Tragedies’ featuring traumatised heroines.<sup>7</sup> But as women gradually began to assert independence in the first two decades of the twentieth century, they sustained a consistent dialogue with Greek drama, demonstrating the seismic transformation of social and cultural life that had been ushered in by late 19<sup>th</sup>-century feminism. This had been presaged by the election of Susanna Salter as the first female mayor in the United States in Argonia, Kansas in 1887, and by the award of the right to vote to the women of Colorado in 1893, even though women in most states could neither vote nor sit on juries for years to come.

### **Transformations of Greek Tragedy**

The most famous figure in making Greek tragedy relevant to avant-garde American women was the Californian Isadora Duncan, born in 1877. She used her growing fame to advocate ‘her own version of feminism’.<sup>8</sup> In her project, the figure of Iphigenia, as musically presented in Gluck’s two *Iphigénie* operas, derived from Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* and *Iphigenia in Tauris*, proved inspirational. Between 1903 and 1916 Duncan worked on selected sections of both pieces, developing the choreography of a total of twenty dances, into a composite dance-drama—the only one of its kind that she attempted.<sup>9</sup> It was a huge success everywhere. In 1915 she even prompted commissioned from the poet Witter Bynner a new translation of the play as a personal star vehicle. Although the production was not a success, Bynner’s lacklustre translation was performed subsequently on college campuses, for example in 1921 at Hunter

College in New York.<sup>10</sup> It has had an important afterlife since a revised version was included in the famous Grene and Lattimore Chicago translations of Greek tragedy.

Duncan's Iphigenia choreography took from Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) her idea that her dance, in affirming the selfhood of the dancer and the spirit of music itself, was the modern equivalent of the chorus of Attic tragedy.<sup>11</sup> The story of Iphigenia also offered Duncan hardcore religious ritual. Sacrificial ritual, as socially orchestrated violence, was felt by Modernists to reflect the explosive energy which 'made the early twentieth-century world modern'.<sup>12</sup> In line with the contemporary interest in ritual, Duncan's interpretation gave a powerful role to an additional Priestess of Tauris. Duncan wanted to recreate the primitive ritual dance for Dionysus for which the classical scholar Jane Ellen Harrison had called in her denunciation of contemporary theatre and her work on ancient myth and religion.<sup>13</sup>

In 1903, the young Pennsylvanian Hilda Doolittle, born nine years later than Duncan in 1886, went to watch the same sacrifice-based Greek play, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, performed at UPenn in Philadelphia. But the cultural impact of this production was out of proportion to its small scale and amateur quality. H.D. was 16 years old, and had met Ezra Pound, then a UPenn student, two years previously. Pound was in the chorus, and made an impression his friend William Williams called comical, 'in a togalike ensemble topped by a great blond wig at which he tore as he waved his arms about and heaved his massive breasts in ecstasies of emotion.'<sup>14</sup> Perhaps Pound's own seminal experiments in Modernist poetry were affected by his intimate knowledge of the choruses of that Greek tragedy, especially its non-iambic metres. Looking back on his early development as a poet, later, in Canto 81, he remembers that 'To break the pentameter, that was the first heave'. As the postmodern writer Brooke-Rose has put it, 'The first free verse of the moderns, usually attributed to Eliot, is stilted compared to Pound's, whose gift this has been to all successors, even those who have never read him'. Of course Pound was affected by poetry in many traditions, including Japanese, but his experience

of the lyric stanzas in Euripides, contrasting so starkly with the iambic dialogues, must not be underestimated.

The play inspired H.D. She wrote much later in her unpublished novel of the 1940s, *The Sword Went Out to Sea*, about her early flirtation with Pound, who appears under the pseudonym of Allen Flint, but the narrator's attention is fixed on another boy. He reads William Morris to her, brings her books, and appears amongst the maidens in a chorus in a Greek play. H.D. has here split her Pound into two different individuals, and she clearly did not react to his performance as a Greek maiden in the same way as Williams. Yet the one performer whom even the caustic Williams said was 'superb' was the Messenger. It was this actor who rekindled H.D.'s childhood interest in the ancient Greeks, and 'awakened' her to the riches of Greek drama and the ancient language: she felt she 'had heard Greek at last'. Euripides was to remain central to her work for the remainder of her life. In the 1920s alone she published *Hippolytus Temporizes* (1927, a verse drama responding to Euripides' *Hippolytus*), and four essays about Euripides, as well as translating parts of *Helen*, *Ion* and *Bacchae*.

The production prompted H.D. to conceive her lifelong fascination with Euripidean choruses. They were subsequently an element in her romance with Richard Aldington, who chose Euripides to read on their honeymoon. Many critics have noted that in her translations of Euripides she presents him as an imagist in the sense meant by Ezra Pound in his *ABC of Reading*.<sup>15</sup> H.D.'s 1916 collection *Sea Garden* reveals the unmistakable influence of Euripidean choruses, and indeed specifically of the *Iphigenia in Tauris*, especially in the delicate lyrics, with their short lines, sharply etched imagery and strong sense of colour, of 'The Cliff Temple' and 'Sea Gods'.

'Sea gods', however, suggests another important way in which the Euripidean tragedy is informing H.D.'s poetic method, and that is through the identification of the poetic voice

with the primitive barbarians of Euripides' play, some of whom, according to the messenger, did indeed think that Orestes and Pylades were gods (268-74). H.D. is using the multiple viewpoints expressed in the messenger speech to think about the arrival of the Greeks from a primitive, pastoral perspective.

The impact of the performance of *Iphigenia in Tauris* on H.D. raises two important questions. The first is how we are to talk about the relationship between the ancient Greek text and the Modernist poems: 'influence' is too banal and imprecise a term when a new creative artist is defining their own avant-garde agenda through an intense interactive and creative dialogue with an earlier cultural tradition. Secondly, H.D.'s idiosyncratic response to the Euripidean messenger actually revolves around the conundrum of what exactly what should be made of pastoral barbarians and their relationship to the white European North American self, traditionally defined as the cultural descendant of ancient Greece and Rome. It is a sign of the tendency of certain ancient plays to become simultaneously attractive across wide constituencies at key moments in cultural history that *Iphigenia in Tauris* also underlay the most important early Mexican adaptation of a Greek tragedy, which used the barbarians of the Euripidean Crimea to think about the interaction between the European colonisers of central America and its indigenous cultures: *Ifigenia Cruel* by Alfonso Reyes (1924). For the first time in the 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 result of a colonial invasion of an indigenous culture by Europeans—the formerly Aztec territory incorporated into the Spanish Empire in the 16<sup>th</sup> century under the name 'New Spain'.

Reyes' *Ifigenia Cruel* become one of the founding texts of Mexican literature, Mexican Modernism and of appropriations of ancient Greek literature in the Spanish language. It is still performed today in Latin America.<sup>16</sup> By the time he wrote *Ifigenia Cruel*, Reyes had conceived

his plan to give voice to the ‘Aztec muse’, by according Mexican literature autochthonous roots to merge with those that had grown in Spain.<sup>17</sup> This project had already been articulated in his *Visión de Anáhuac* (1917), 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 the conquistadors’ Christian imperialism. Reyes’ Ifigenia asks the Greek visitors why they are surprised to find themselves condemned after invading a civilization more ancient than they can imagine:

You are strong men for the Virgin.

Civilization was established long before your infancy.

History began long ago.<sup>18</sup>

The Pre-Columbus Indian and the ancient Greek are similarly brought into dialogue in *The Professor’s House*, an important novel—some critics say her masterpiece--by Willa Cather, published the year after *Ifigenia Cruel*, in 1925.

Born in Virginia in 1873, raised in Nebraska, and spending her young adulthood in Pittsburgh, in *The Professor’s House* Cather used the geographical size and diversity of the United States to examine the problems involved in creating a new collective identity adequate to the history and hybridity of the emergent superpower. Hermione Lee has shown how Cather in other novels uses Latin epic and pastoral to configure stories of the North American frontier,<sup>19</sup> for she loved Classics from childhood. She read Latin and Greek at school in the small town of Red Cloud from the age of nine and claimed that she had read Caesar and Homer by the age of fifteen. Before she left High School, she presented herself in ways declaring her membership of a new generation of emancipated women—she wore her hair short, chose ‘rationalised’ fashion and ostentatiously studied the ‘boys’ subjects’ of Latin and Greek.<sup>20</sup>

Acutely aware that women's study of Classics threatened traditional gender roles, she included in her *Shadows on the Rock* (1931) a discussion about the propriety of girls in colonial French Canada being taught Latin at all.<sup>21</sup> On arrival at the University of Nebraska in 1890, Cather turned her enrolment for Greek classes into a theatrical statement of her identity as a New Woman.<sup>22</sup> Like the heroine of her story *Tommy the Unsentimental* (1896), she began reading both sciences and classics, but swiftly concentrated on literature in Greek, Latin, French and English. She was inspired by the teaching of her Classics Professor, Herbert Bates, who made all his students learn Greek verse off by heart to recite in class.<sup>23</sup> Before she finished college, Cather had herself assumed the role of Electra in a flowing gown, in a tableau given in conjunction with a student production. She had read and annotated Aristotle's *Poetics*, as well as Browning's longer poems, which engage with ancient Greek theatrical poetry. She had also spent many hours watching plays, new and old, in the theatre at Lincoln.<sup>24</sup> Her experience of Greek theatre affected her approach to creating environments in her fiction. In her manifesto in the *New Republic* of 1922, she had said she wanted to throw the crowded furniture of literary realism 'out of the window...and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre.'<sup>25</sup>

In *The Professor's House*, Cather involves Euripides and the lost civilisation of the Pueblo Indians in analysing the nascent sense of American selfhood. The history of the European colonisation of America is presented as a collision between two perspectives. On the one hand, Cather illuminates eastern-facing and conservative cultural values nostalgically looking back across the Atlantic to a classical past. The character who represents these is the titular Professor, Godfrey St. Peter, a classically handsome man of late middle age, whose head seemed 'more like a statue's head than a man's.'<sup>26</sup> His Professorship is in European History at Hamilton College. With no interest in money, he is appalled by politics, retreating from the world to sip illicit old wines imported from Europe in defiance of Prohibition. He is psychologically alienated from his snobbish, coquettish and worldly wife. Beneath this

characterisation lurks Euripides as he is presented in the ancient biographical tradition—a misogynist loner with a vast personal library. When hurt by his daughter, the Professor says that he is thinking ‘about Euripides; how, when he was an old man, he went and lived in a cave by the sea...it seems that houses had become insupportable to him.’<sup>27</sup> Born on Lake Michigan, a true North American with both French Canadian and British Methodist ancestry, he also represents Spanish conquerors of the ‘New’ World: for fifteen years he has been writing his *Spanish Adventurers in North America*.

Cather creates a memorable character, Tom Outland, to balance St. Peter by holding out the hope of a brighter new American morning. In a trope typical also of male American Modernists drawn to the Greeks—Faulkner, Eliot, Fitzgerald--she paradoxically symbolises this hope *both* by technological and scientific advance *and* by a return to the past,<sup>28</sup> in her case the evocation of the indigenous people of the continent before the Europeans came. Outland is filled with the spirit of the Indigenous Muse as opposed to St. Peter’s Migrant Melpomene. The hope is still only that—a hope--and its fragility is underlined by death of Outland at the age of thirty, fighting at Flanders. Outland does not enter the story as a living character until a long ‘flashback’ half-way through the novel, by which time Cather has established the staleness overwhelming the subjectivity of the Professor.

Outland was a brilliant scientist who discovered a principle relating to vacuums, patented as the Outland Engine. At the time of the novel it has already revolutionised aviation. Like St. Peter, he had no time for American capitalism and was in pursuit of more cerebral ideals than the other, business-oriented characters. But in other respects he differs from the Professor. He is a working-class orphan with little idea of his biological family’s historical roots, thus symbolising the entire uprooted, transplanted population of modern America. Outland was born on an unknown date to an unknown mother crossing Kansas in a ‘prairie schooner’—one of the iconic covered waggon symbolic of the white winning of the West—

but she had died and he was raised as a foundling by an Irish locomotive engineer in the liminal geospatial zone of New Mexico. Outland never attended high school, but had a passion for books and persuaded a priest to teach him classical Latin. At the age of twenty he turned up at Hamilton College with a few hundred dollars and persuaded St. Peter to support his enrolment.

In a Hellenism carefully distinguished from the Professor's Periclean hauteur, Outland is identified with the pre-classical, Minoan-Mycenaean world. The novel establishes parallels between its culture and that of the indigenous Americans. Outland has associated with Indians, and speaks in their defence. But he is also an expert on the pre-Columbus Pueblo 'Cliff-Dwellers'; indeed, he has possesses samples of their pottery. One is described as 'shaped like those common in Greek sculpture, and ornamented with a geometrical pattern'.<sup>29</sup> The lack of value accorded to these ancient creations of indigenous Americans is emphasised when he dismisses the idea that museums might be interested, saying 'they don't care about our things. They want something that came from Crete or Egypt.'<sup>30</sup>

Outland is thus a spokesman for the possibility of an 'indigenous Muse,' as for the possibility of a more egalitarian America. In adopting Outland as his protégé, the Professor discovers a love of an entirely non-sexual kind for another human which transforms the musty tedium of his life and opens up thrilling horizons. One is Outland's intuitive socialism: St. Peter admires the way he will not let financial considerations contaminate friendship, 'a result of Tom's strange bringing-up and early associations', of a 'dream of self-sacrificing friendship and disinterested love down among the day-labourers, the men who run the railroad trains and boats and reapers and thrashers and mine-drills of the world.'<sup>31</sup>

Outland's sustained voice is only heard in the long first-person account constituting much of the second half of the novel. His life had been spent with the working-classes of the

south-west, allowing Cather to remind her reader of the industrial conflicts which had blighted recent history, including the hanging of the Chicago anarchists in 1887. But most of the story consists of Outland's exquisite account of his exploration, when working as a cowboy, of the 'Cliff Palace' at Mesa Verde. This fictionalised narrative is based on the historical discovery, in 1885, of the ruins of the Anasazi people, near the remote crossroads where Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona and Utah meet.<sup>32</sup> The discovery had resulted in the foundation of the Mesa Verde National Park according to the terms of the Antiquities Act 1906.

The Mesa Verde ruins were important in the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century attempt to reconcile pre-Columbus strands in the nation's identity with the narrative of heroic immigrant pioneers who 'won the West.' They were instrumental in the foundation of Anthropology and Ethnology as respectable American intellectual pursuits.<sup>33</sup> But in Cather's hands, they bring to life the whole lost story of the real, original Americans, with whom the disadvantaged young man becomes obsessed, and whom he adopts as 'true' cultural ancestors. The ruins dated from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, and created a stir because they had the potential to bestow on the new United States 'a prehistory distinct from, and rival to, that of ancient Greece or Egypt.'<sup>34</sup> Outland notes the resemblance between pottery designs he discovered and those of early Cretan pottery, which in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century were being dug up apace by Sir Arthur Evans, amongst others. Suddenly, America might not just be a migrant offspring of old Europe, but an equal and a sibling. Although few dared consider the possibility that the Anasazis' ancestors had not arrived from Europe, the sophistication of the Pueblo culture surprised visitors. They were settled, lived in built dwellings, fired pots, and decorated them with geometric designs: the logical inference was that America had been home to a people so ancient that they could be considered autochthonous, however they had originally arrived there, at a level of development equivalent to the Minoans and Mycenaeans. They were on the verge of creating a civilisation as advanced as that of classical, 'Periclean' Athens.

Cather had herself had tried to visit Cliff Palace in 1915, with her lifetime companion Edith Lewis. The experience impressed her. In *The Professor's House*, by reinvigorating the cynical Euripides-figure in the recollection of Outland's account of the discovery of a 'true' American ancestry, Cather offers a partial solution to the problem of the identity of contemporary Americans—they must acknowledge both the imported European Muse and the silenced indigenous Muse, who could be accessed, if only remotely, through her pottery. Curiously absent from the novel is any female figure of intellectual stature: the Professor's wife and discontented daughters seem to be expressions of Cather's contempt for the narrowness of most middle-class women's horizons and aspirations. Yet in the Cliff City, we are given one powerful female figure, 'Mother Eve', a mummified Indian who comes to symbolize, for Tom, the real human and civilisation which had existed on those dusty cliff-tops. Cather may not in this novel offer her reader adventurous feminists, but she does create an inspirational, mummified indigenous Muse in this elemental Mother figure.

### **The Feminist Theatre of Susan Glaspell**

In the theatre itself, the female figure whose immersion in ancient Greek drama had most impact was Susan Glaspell, pillar of the Provincetown Players, playwright, novelist and incalculable influence on Eugene O'Neill. Born in 1876, just three years after Cather, she was raised on an Iowa farm, fascinated by the native Sauk people, and throughout her life remained deeply identified with the Mid-West and the people who had inhabited it before the Europeans came, an identification most explicit in her *The Inheritors* (1921), which, as we shall see, is partly inspired by Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Glaspell was from a down-at-heel Iowa farming family who could not afford to educate her. But she became a local journalist and saved up to enter Drake University at Des Moines in

1897, where she studied philosophy, Greek, French, History and Biblical Studies. In 1902 she also took courses in literature at Chicago University, before hurling herself into a Bohemian lifestyle and circle of friends in Paris and New York. Her own immersion in Greek literature is a neglected aspect of her work; Greek tragedy informed many of her novels, especially *Fugitive's Return* (1929), a bestseller. It tells the story of a Midwestern woman who travels to Greece in a plot which reverberates with motifs and scenery from Euripides' *Ion* (as well as partly modelling the heroine on Eva Sikelianos).

Glaspell is difficult to write about, because her major contributions to the Provincetown Players have been obscured by those of two men, her husband George ('Jig') Cram Cook and the playwright she mentored, Eugene O'Neill. She systematically presented Cook as the intellectual guiding force in their relationship, even though she was equally well read and by far the better dramatist. Their passionate affair, which began in about 1908, did later turn into a marriage, but Cook was often unfaithful to Glaspell as well. A flavour of her feelings about her limited emotional choices emerges from her short story 'From A to Z', published in a collection suggestively entitled *Lifted Masks* in 1912, concerning a young female student at Chicago University, studying Greek and philosophy. She fantasises about securing a real paid job in a publishing house, enhanced by 'books and pictures and cultivated gentlemen who spoke often of Greek tragedies and the Renaissance'. She has a passionate relationship with a free-thinking publisher with whom she works on a revolutionary dictionary. But in the end she relinquishes her freedom, with foreboding in her heart, for a life with a conventional suitor.

Glaspell can't be fully understood without recognising how impressed she was by Cook's Ivy League education and accomplishments. He came from an old English colonial family, and was born in 1873 at Davenport in Iowa. He had studied Classics and English literature at both Harvard and Heidelberg. He worked as a literary critic, taught literature at Iowa and Stanford Universities, and published a novel about the relationship between

Nietzsche and Marx (*Chasm*, 1911). Much of our information derives from Glaspell's 1926 biography, *The Road to the Temple*, which tells Cook's life story leading up to foundation of the Provincetown Players, their move to Greece in 1922 and his death at Delphi two years later. It is hagiographical in tone, undoubtedly misrepresents the history of his troubled relationships both with her and the Provincetown Players, and under-estimates the threat to his creativity and efficiency caused by his lifelong alcoholism. Yet there is no doubt that their mutual obsession with ancient Greek culture, and especially theatre, proved a strong bond and that they must have discussed individual plays in detail.

This is clear in the case of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. Cook had seen the Greek play in New York City in 1914, and wrote to Glaspell lamenting the lack of political theatre in contemporary society.<sup>35</sup> With an uncertain amount of help from Glaspell, who helped shape the dialogue and some scenes,<sup>36</sup> he then wrote his most substantial drama, *The Athenian Women*, inspired by *Lysistrata* and the Russian revolution and set in Periclean Athens. Premiering on March 1<sup>st</sup> 1918, it was given seven performances. The USA had been at war with Germany for a year, which had included the bloody Battle of Passchendaele. The Russian government had fallen on November 7<sup>th</sup> to the Bolsheviks, whose revolutionary government had agreed an armistice with the Central Powers. On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, just after the opening of *The Athenian Women*, they signed the treaty of Brest Litovsk which made that armistice official. President Woodrow Wilson wanted to persuade the world to respect the Russians' right to self-determination. This specific moment in the political history of the United States is mirrored at every stage in *The Athenian Women*.

Cram was convinced of parallels between the Peloponnesian War and World War I. He believed there had been communists in Periclean Athens comparable to those who were making strides in Russia (in 1922 to become the USSR) and the socialists in America, amongst whom he and Glaspell counted themselves. In the 'Preface' to the text of *The Athenian Women*

(published posthumously, in 1926, under Glaspell's supervision, with a facing Modern Greek translation), he claims that the *Assemblywomen* of Aristophanes proves that there was 'a communist movement' in Athens, and that 'there is nothing to show' that Lysicles, Aspasia's lover, 'was not a communist'.<sup>37</sup> Lysicles, claims Cook, was responsible after Pericles' death for introducing the first tax on property ever levied in Athens (Thucydides 3.19.1 mentions this measure). But the most important figure in the play is Aspasia, the Asiatic courtesan whom Pericles loved and eventually married. The Provincetown Aspasia is a feminist and a passionate proponent of peace, with attributes of both Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and of Praxagora in *Assemblywomen*

Act I of the play is set in Aspasia's house in 445 BC. Pericles is married to Kallia, and pursuing an imperialist policy against other Greek states. The visionary pacifist Aspasia is attached to the politician Lysicles, and they discuss how to stop Pericles' militarism. But she also persuades Kallia to pressurise Pericles to cease from warmongering and to help her make an alliance with the women of Sparta. Act II includes an Assembly of Women taking place during the women-only festival of the Thesmophoria in the temple of Demeter (Cook here borrows from the third Aristophanic 'women' play, *Thesmophoriazusae*). Pericles is persuaded by Aspasia to make Athens a city of artistic rather than imperialist enterprise. He transfers his affections from Kallia to Aspasia, and the passion is mutual. Between acts II and III, set in 431 BC, the audience are to imagine a fourteen-year peace blessing Athens. The Parthenon has been erected, and endless artistic and philosophical dialogues conducted in the salon of Pericles and Aspasia, where the action is now set. But when a vengeful Kallia joins forces with a politician to bring Pericles and Aspasia down, events spiral out of control, and the Peloponnesian War breaks out. The dream of the peace-loving democratic 'City Beautiful' is over.

The socialist politics of the play are emphatically stated. Lysicles fails to stop Pericles from receiving endorsement for annexing Euboea because the Assembly is blighted by class snobbery. Lysicles is a livestock-merchant. When he tries to speak, Pericles' clique makes sheep noises.<sup>38</sup> Aspasia announces that inherited wealth stops people thinking independently and turns women into 'merchants of love'.<sup>39</sup> But the play also shows a commitment to feminism which I suspect is the result of Glaspell's steady input. Although colluding in stereotypes of women as irrationally swayed by physical desire, it voices trenchant opinions: Aspasia says, 'the Athenian woman who marries accepts the life of a cow'.<sup>40</sup>

Glaspell's contribution to the birth of indigenous American theatre is as obscured by her relationship with Eugene O'Neill as well as her marriage to Cook. She learned from O'Neill, but he certainly learned from her and benefitted from her encouragement. Glaspell herself, although published as a journalist and novelist, did not attempt to write drama until her husband demanded it in 1915, needing new plays for the company. She later admitted that she had then abandoned her successful career as a novelist to throw herself full-time into the establishment of the Players and producing material for them.<sup>41</sup> Glaspell co-wrote (some said 'wrote') their Freudian satire *Suppressed Desires*. But just as she started her one-act *Trifles*, O'Neill joined them with his *Bound East for Cardiff*. During the next two years the dialogue between all three was intense and incessant. Fifteen of O'Neill's plays and eleven of Glaspell's were produced by the Provincetown players before the original company disintegrated in 1922. Her influence upon O'Neill has never been systematically evaluated, although their contemporaries were in little doubt about it, and Linda Ben-Zvi has begun to analyse the complexities of their intertextual relationship.<sup>42</sup>

*Trifles* is an outstanding play, which still finds performances. Glaspell subsequently rewrote it as a story entitled *A Jury of her Peers*, and this version is guaranteed a wide feminist

audience in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because Elaine Showalter borrowed the title for her classic study of American women writers (2009). *Trifles* was first performed on August 8<sup>th</sup> 1916 at the Wharf Theatre. It was inspired by Glaspell's experience in 1900-1901 of the trial of a woman named Margaret Hossack. She was charged with murdering her husband, an Iowa farmer, Clytemnestra-like with an axe. Glaspell had covered the trial for the *Des Moines Daily News*. Hossack was convicted, but was released in 1903 after a retrial ended in a hung jury. There was only circumstantial evidence against her—the relationship with her husband was unhappy and involved quarrels over his treatment of at least one of their children. No other suspect was ever in the frame.

Glaspell turns this mysterious 'unsolved' murder case into a one-act play. She stages a visit to a farmhouse where a man has been murdered and his wife Minnie Foster is under arrest. The County Attorney, the Sheriff and a neighbour are accompanied by the wives of the Sheriff and the neighbour. The group assessing the evidence—the 'jury of her peers'--thus includes peers of the alleged murderess's own sex (women were not allowed to serve on juries in Iowa until 1921).<sup>43</sup> The word 'trifles' is used disparagingly by the men in the play to refer to domestic objects belonging to the world of women. But the women realise that such 'trifles' are clues to the distressing psychological history which underlies the murder: the dead man had been controlling and joyless, while Minnie had long since stopped being the happy girl they remember, who loved clothes and singing. One 'trifle' is a quilt which Minnie had been sewing for years. The earlier stitches are careful, but the more recent ones deteriorate as if she was undergoing psychological disturbance. The women find an empty birdcage, and Minnie's canary, with a broken neck, in a pretty box ready for burial (the implication is that her husband had killed it). In the end, the two women rebel and secretly hide the deranged sewing and the dead canary, to prevent them being used in evidence.

My prosaic summary does not convey the taut brilliance of the dialogue and its intellectual clout. Glaspell's achievement, besides producing a play of exceptional feminist insight, is that she has made 'the slightest of dramatic forms carry such a burden of meaning.'<sup>44</sup> It is in this *formal* sense that Glaspell's *Trifles* reveals the scale of her debt to Greek tragedy. With a tiny cast, a single location, and a short episode exploring a violent household crime, she yet reveals all its antecedents and consequences and wider social significance. The hermetic atmosphere and onstage experience of the memory of offstage suffering are like no other tradition of tragic theatre except Greek. No particular ancient Greek play is specifically referenced, and yet Glaspell's immersion in Greek dramatic culture is palpable. It is not just the husband-murdering theme (*Agamemnon*), nor the detective trail on which the women embark (*Oedipus*), nor the loneliness and resentment of insensitivity which might lead a woman to kill (*Medea*). Even more significant are the speaking testimony of the needlework and silenced songbird, which must have been inspired by the several references in Greek tragedy to the story of Procne and Philomela, Sophocles' own famous version of which is mentioned in both Thucydides and Aristotle's *Poetics*. As Marina Angel has observed, the decision to take collective action on behalf of Minnie against the men, and the thematic importance of the theme of 'unravelling' both of the stitches and Minnie's true story, both also show Glaspell responding to Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*.<sup>45</sup>

Glaspell's *The Outside* (which premiered at the Playwrights' Theatre on December 28<sup>th</sup> 1917) is shorter and lacks the feminist clarity of *Trifles*. Here the presence of Greek tragedy in the cocktail of ingredients is felt mostly through the setting. Once again, Glaspell chooses just five characters and an episode that last less than an hour. The setting is Cape Cod. The play opens, in a scenario reminiscent of Euripides' *Hecuba*, with the corpse of a young man who has just drowned in the sea. The beach can be seen through the doorway constituting the set. The two women are associated with the inside of the house and the three men with the outside.

The corpse is the visual centre of the play, brought on at the beginning and picked up at the end. One woman has been mute for twenty years, but the events inspire her to break her silence; the other has been abandoned by her man, and is able through dialogue with the un-muted woman (faintly reminiscent of the encounter between Cassandra and Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*) to recover her will to live. As in *Trifles*, Glaspell's fascination with Greek tragedy is expressed not in adaptation but in experiment with particular aspects of dramaturgy, especially the relationship between the living and the dead and the disciplined 'unities' of time and place.

Glaspell's most respected play besides *Trifles* is *The Verge* (premiered November 14th 1921 and also staged by Edith Craig's Pioneer Players at the Regent Theatre). It is admired for the originality of its central scenographic conception—an enormous flowering plant which reflects the psychological experiences of the central character, Claire, an intellectual who reads books in Latin. The only time she has ever been happy is while soaring above the earth in an aeroplane. She seeks self-fulfilment, unable to find happiness through her marriage, motherhood, or an affair. On the verge of madness, she kills the man with whom she shares a passionate but intellectual bond. *The Verge* shows Glaspell, again, framing the drastic psychological journey of a woman held captive by societal expectations of her sex, but exploring her interiority more deeply, in a way reminiscent of Ibsen's heroines and of the 'interior' monologues of Euripides' Medea, Phaedra, and Creusa in *Ion*; with Creusa and Medea, Claire also shares a trauma related to the birth of a boy-child; her son Harry died young. The action compresses Claire's breakdown into less than twenty-four hours, while exploring her life history, and culminates in tragic violence, although bearing a far less strongly marked relationship to an individual Greek tragedy than the four-act *Inheritors*, her other, more conventional play of 1921.

*Inheritors* was first performed by the Provincetown Players on April 27<sup>th</sup> 1921. Like *The Verge* it was performed, to acclaim, in Europe—at the Liverpool Repertory under the management of William Armstrong on 18<sup>th</sup> January 1926. *Inheritors* owes a debt to Sophocles' *Antigone*, but relocating the heroine's protest to a Midwestern prairie. The first act is set forty years earlier than the others, in a farmhouse on the same prairie in about 1880, where Grandmother Morton reminisces about the Blackhawk War with the Indians fought back in 1832. She herself had received nothing but kindness from the Indians when she had arrived. Blackhawk was the chief, and it was in this valley that the Indians used to come to hold their games and funerals, like Iliadic warlords. She remembers her husband and Blackhawk climbing the local hill together and talking 'about how the red and the white man might live together'.<sup>46</sup> Her son Silas Morton, an autodidact, has never recovered from what white people did to the local Indians. He conceives a mission to found a college on that hill, to honour the land's original inhabitants, as a form of restitution. He is desperate to be able to 'lie under same sod with the red boys and not be ashamed.'<sup>47</sup>

The subsequent three acts are set in 1920. Silas Morton did found his college. The Antigone figure is Madeline, his granddaughter, now a student there. The political question is her support of two Hindu students from British India, who are threatened with deportation as campaigners for Indian independence. This was a pressing issue in 1920, after the Imperial Legislative Council in London had passed the Rowlatt Act, granting the Indian Viceroy powers to detain suspected activists without warrant or trial. The crisis produced the Amritsar massacre of 13<sup>th</sup> April 1919, when the British army fired into an unarmed assembly, killing over a thousand people. At Morton College, Madeline attempts to prevent a policeman from arresting an Indian student. She strikes the officer with her tennis racket. The climax of the drama is the confrontation of Madeline with her powerful Hungarian-American uncle, Felix Fejevary, which replays in Glaspell's modern idiom the confrontation of Antigone and Creon.

Since the death of her mother, and her father's decline into insanity (a suitably tragic nuclear family for an avatar of Sophocles' heroine), Fejevary has assumed a parental role in Madeline's life. Now that her brother has been killed in the war (like Antigone's brothers), Fejevary is all the family she has left. But as a banker with old-fashioned views on feminine decorum he repudiates her values and valour. He demands to know why she is not 'ashamed' to be 'a girl who rushes in and assaults an officer'.<sup>48</sup> Madeline insists that she was acting in defence of the principle of freedom of speech on which the college and America were founded, and that she intends to fight for the release of her Indian comrades. Her defiance infuriates her uncle: 'You could get twenty years in prison for things you'll say if you rush there now (*she laughs*) You laugh because you're ignorant. Do you know that in America today there are women in our prisons for saying no more you've said here to me!'<sup>49</sup>

At the conclusion, Madeline is due to go before the United States Commissioner, but refuses to apologise to her uncle and let him intervene on her behalf. She has been writing to a political prisoner, and knows the size of the dark cell which awaits her: she draws its outline in chalk to prepare herself, as Antigone imagines going to be buried in her sunless cave. But Glaspell wants her audience to understand that more is at stake than one young woman's liberty: it is a battle for the heart, soul and identity of America. When a friend protests that Madeline is powerless to change things, she replies that she is 'an American. And for that reason I think I have something to say about America.'<sup>50</sup> At the end she breaks down in despair, but resolutely departs for her appointment with destiny.

The neglect this play has suffered is inexplicable, both because it is such a radical response to the famous Sophoclean tragedy and because it was written by a woman. If Eugene O'Neill were the author, it would have been read as much as *Mourning becomes Electra* or *Desire under the Elms*. The connections Glaspell draws between the pioneers' expropriation of Indian land on the Mississippi prairies and the struggles of Hindus under the British Raj is

ambitious; by adopting from the Greek play the theme of the distinctive family character which Madeline inherits down the paternal line, the transhistorical story is handled deftly and with concision. Madeline herself sees no connection between her gender and her activism—she defines herself simply as an American. On the other hand, the men who would control her—not only her uncle, but her cousin, her disturbed father, the police and the judiciary—find her behaviour more deplorable in a woman. This feminist undertext is paralleled in Glaspell's own *oeuvre* by her novel *The Visioning* (1911), which examines sexual double standards in a mid-western military community.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the classical Muse successfully migrated westward in that Greek drama played a role in the creation by women of a new American cultural identity. All four discussed in this chapter used Greek plays to meditate on their identity as feminists and as creators of artworks which could challenge the complacent, patriarchal, Ivy League monopoly on the Greek classics and their legacy. Greek tragedy helped them make innovatory strides in aesthetic form—whether the liberated, emotionally expressive dance of Duncan, the imagism and cut-crystal diction of H.D., the dialogue between Cather's Professor and young scientist, or the tightly-coiled theatre of violence and female subjectivity which Glaspell pioneered. Duncan, H.D. and Glaspell all responded to individual ancient Greek dramas, the most neglected example being the use of *Antigone* in Glaspell's *Inheritors*. Cather and Glaspell both found imagining a relationship between ancient Greek culture and the forgotten indigenous Americans fruitful in the exploration of identity politics.

Cather and Glaspell also both used the Greeks to face the challenge that disparities in income and class status posed to 'official' American ideals of equality and freedom. Glaspell, however, did this from a startlingly committed and explicitly revolutionary (her own word was 'revolutionist') political position. She certainly at least contributed to Cook's delineation of Aspasia in *The Athenian Women* as a feminist Bolshevik; she was the sole creator of the

Madeline/Antigone who in *Inheritors* speaks as a sincere American supporter of the poor as well as treasonable dissidence against the British Raj. History has shown how later in the twentieth century, gender and race are no longer regarded as acceptable grounds for disqualification from possession of a full ‘American identity,’ yet the problem of disparities in wealth and opportunity has never been fully acknowledged. Perhaps that is the reason why, of these four women Modernist pioneers inspired by Greek drama, it is only Glaspell—in some ways the most original of all—who has long become almost inaudible.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Greek drama played a role in the creation by women of a new American Modernist cultural identity. This chapter discusses four Americans who used Greek plays to meditate on their identity as feminists and as creators of Modernist artworks which challenged the complacent, patriarchal, Ivy- League monopoly on the Greek ‘Classics’ and explore female subjectivity: Isadora Duncan, H.D., Willa Cather and Susan Glaspell. Greek tragedy helped them make innovatory strides in aesthetic form as well as in techniques of adaptation of content, in Glaspell’s case contributing, to a previously unacknowledged degree, to the creation of a newly radical dramatic tradition in the theatre of the Provincetown Players. Cather and Glaspell also used the Greeks to create links with the culture of indigenous Americans and to grapple with the challenge which gross disparities in income and class status posed to the ‘official’ American ideals of equality and freedom.

---

<sup>1</sup> Coolidge (1924) 66.

<sup>2</sup> Duncan (1927) 168.

<sup>3</sup> Staley (2004) 6.

<sup>4</sup> Singal (1987) 9.

<sup>5</sup> Singal (1987) 9-10; see also the discussion of Millington (2005) 52-3.

<sup>6</sup> Hall (2008) ch. 9.

<sup>7</sup> Hall and Macintosh (2005) ch. 3.

<sup>8</sup> Morgenroth (1998) 93.

<sup>9</sup> Layson (1983) 43; Zanobi (2010) 236.

<sup>10</sup> According to the *New York Times* for November 23<sup>rd</sup> 1921, the production, in the college's chapel, was directed by Elizabeth Vera Loeb, and Bynner himself assisted with the staging. See also Kraft (1981) 19.

<sup>11</sup> Duncan (1928) 96.

<sup>12</sup> Staley (2004) 6.

<sup>13</sup> Stone Peters (2008).

<sup>14</sup> Williams (1951) 57; see Carpenter (1988) 42, but note that he is incorrect in his statement that the production was in English.

<sup>15</sup> Pound (37).

<sup>16</sup> Aponte (1972) 26; Hall (2013) 276-7.

<sup>17</sup> Conn (2002) 121-3.

<sup>18</sup> Reyes (1924) 41.

<sup>19</sup> Lee (2008) 84-99.

<sup>20</sup> Stout (2000) 29

<sup>21</sup> See Stout (2000) 14.

<sup>22</sup> Stout (2000) 31.

<sup>23</sup> Downs (1999) 46-7.

<sup>24</sup> Stout (2000) 41, 44.

<sup>25</sup> See Swift (2005).

<sup>26</sup> Cather (1981) 13.

<sup>27</sup> Cather (1981) 156.

<sup>28</sup> Orvell (1995) 7

<sup>29</sup> Cather (1981) 118.

<sup>30</sup> Cather (1981) 119.

<sup>31</sup> Cather (1981) 173.

<sup>32</sup> For details see Horwitz (1995) 358-9.

<sup>33</sup> Horwitz (1995) 353-4.

<sup>34</sup> Horwitz (1995) 362

<sup>35</sup> Glaspell (1926) 191.

<sup>36</sup> Ozieblo (2000) 119-20.

<sup>37</sup> Cook (1926) 2.

<sup>38</sup> Cook (1926) 60.

<sup>39</sup> Cook (1926) 36-8.

<sup>40</sup> Cook (1926) 40.

<sup>41</sup> Ozieblo (2000) 139.

<sup>42</sup> Ozieblo (2000) 150-1; Ben-Zvi (2005).

<sup>43</sup> See Angel (1996) 238-9.

<sup>44</sup> Bigsby in Glaspell (1987) 12.

<sup>45</sup> Angel (2002) 89-90.

<sup>46</sup> Glaspell (1987) 105

<sup>47</sup> Glaspell (1987) 138.

<sup>48</sup> Glaspell (1987) 137.

<sup>49</sup> Glaspell (1987) 141.

<sup>50</sup> Glaspell (1987) 145.