

# The Revolutionary Intertextuality of *Molora* by Yäel Farber

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**Abstract** This article focuses on the challenging intertextual phenomenology characterising the play *Molora* by South African playwright and director of international acclaim Yäel Farber. Premiered in Grahamstown in 2003, and published in 2008 after award-winning national and international tours, *Molora* is a radical adaptation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. It dramatises the challenges faced by South Africa in the highly-charged post-Apartheid aftermath, through dramatic confrontations between Klytemnestra, Elektra, and Orestes echoing the testimonies delivered by perpetrators and victims on the TRC's 'stage', and through a chorus made up of seven Xhosa matriarchs belonging to the Ngquoko split-tone singers, who witness, comment on and significantly participate in the play's action. *Molora*'s complex intertextual construction and dynamic are shown to call for a hermeneutical approach careful to avoid simplifying presentifications, as well as any possible fracture with extratextuality. Intertextuality, in fact, is here given the task to creatively and syncretically combine the ancient Greek text with the indigenous Xhosa text through a process of transcultural imbrication that, from beginning to end, exudes the tragedies of all-too-present history while instantiating a revolutionary use of memory.

**Keywords** Yäel Farber. *Molora*. Intertextuality. Intertextuality and hermeneutics. Greek tragedy in post-Apartheid theatre. Transcultural intertextuality.

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For this alone is lacking even to God, to make undone things that have once been done. (Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 6.2)

The past must be reopened, and the unaccomplished, thwarted, even massacred potentialities rekindled. [...] One must know how to be unhistorical – that is, how to forget – when the historical past becomes an unbearable burden. (P. Ricoeur, *From Text to Action*)

[Intertextuality] a pour elle ce mérite spécifique de relancer constamment les œuvres anciennes dans un nouveau circuit de sens. La mémoire, dit-on, est “révolutionnaire” à condition sans doute qu’on la féconde, et qu’elle ne se contente pas de commémorer. (G. Genette, *Palimpsestes*)

## 1 Introduction

The play *Molora*, by the South African playwright and director Yäel Farber, debuted at the 2003 Grahamstown National Arts Festival and was published in revised form in the 2008 Oberon edition here used. It has toured world-wide, receiving multiple international awards. In this radical adaptation of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* Farber reimagines the mythos of the cursed House of Atreus in the context of Apartheid South Africa’s aftermath, and its Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). The source and success of *Molora*’s challenging radicalness lies in the ways Farber has employed intertextuality, which is the purpose of this essay to investigate.

## 2 On Intertextuality and the Hermeneutical Approach

Intertextuality, be it explicitly active or implicit and passive, is the destiny of any text, as it is of any human word/discourse (Bakhtin 1982) – most fascinatingly so, of artistic and literary texts. Still, there are those, among the latter, that programmatically “construct themselves intertextually” and “thematize intertextuality so as to make it their operative mode” (Rajan 1991, 66) – their tenor and their vehicle, tropologically speaking.<sup>1</sup> The theatrical text *Molora* (the Sesotho word for ‘ash’), is one of them. Of course, there is no need to underline the intrinsically intertextual nature of adaptation. Still, the aim of the present article is to adequately foreground for the reader what

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Genette 1982, 18: “il n’est pas d’œuvre littéraire qui, a quelque degré et selon les lectures, n’en évoque quelque autre et, en ce sens, toutes les œuvres sont hypertextuelles. Mais, comme les égaux d’Orwell, certaines le sont plus [...] que d’autres”. By ‘hypertextual’ Genette means current ‘intertextual’. All the references to the French theorist’s critical idiolect and treatment of intertextuality in this article are to be referred to *Palimpsestes*.

is, in many ways, a truly challenging and, to adopt Gerard Genette's key-word in the above epigraph, revolutionary intertextual feat, by dwelling on its orchestration and dynamic, and on the hermeneutical implications entailed by them.

An opportune step in doing this is to qualify from the start my use of the terms 'intertextual'/'intertextuality' since "[i]ntertextuality is one of the most commonly used and misused terms in coeval critical vocabulary [...] is not a transparent term [...] and cannot be evoked in an uncomplicated manner" (Allen 2000, 2). Besides the basic awareness that any text is an intertext, the intuitive generative image of a fabric woven from the threads of the already written/said – both 'text' and 'texture' deriving from the Latin stem *texere* – remains a safe point of anchorage. Another may be Halliday and Hasan's classic definition of *texture* as what makes of a text a semantic unit, cohesive and coherent (1976, 326). With theatre, what is cohesively woven within this unity are not only relationships between coeval and anterior dramatic texts, but, also, relationships between the dramatic text and the performance text made of the actors' bodies, their kinesics and proxemics, as well as of the set's sounds and lights. And all these interwoven codes in their turn relate to their extra-text, the social and historical text inhabited by the playwright and his/her audience.

That considered, the intertextual approach espoused in the present essay owes less to Julia Kristeva's and Roland Barthes's semiotic paradigms of intertextuality, as developed by post-structural and post-modern theory, and more to the fundamental assumptions of M.M. Bakhtin's philosophy of language and of H.G Gadamer's and Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics. In saying that, I have certainly no intention to play down the dynamic and productive conception of the literary space or "literary word" as of an "intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), as a dialogue among several writings, that of the writer, the addressee (or character), and the contemporary or earlier contexts", in the manifesto-like quote from Kristeva (1980, 65). Still, one finds it difficult to minimize the objections levelled from the field of literary theory and criticism at the inadequate attention lent by Kristeva to the specifics of literary intertextuality in her encroaching of signifying systems,<sup>2</sup> and at her nebulous dealing with the links between the literary and the social texts – a staple in Bakhtin's theory.

With Barthes, this nebulosity around the social and historical text becomes sheer evaporation for his figuring intertextuality as unbounded, synchronic semiosis, whether voluntary or not being of no

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<sup>2</sup> Frow 1991 has written convincingly on the problematic (political, too) implications resulting from this blurring of the "ontological" distinction between the textual and the real. See also Clayton, Rothstein 1991, part I; Rajan 1991.

substantial relevance. Invaluable as many of Barthes' s lunges to any authoritative, reified and static view of the text continue to be, his conception of textuality as a "stereophonic",<sup>3</sup> anonymizing traffic of references with no points of origin (the author having been declared "dead") and with the reader reduced to a mere, a-historic receptacle, is theoretically and practically unsuitable to answer *the* crucial question: in Allen's words, "[d]oes intertextuality aid the practice of interpretation, or resist notions of interpretations?" (2000, 59). Apparently, the semiotic model of the type initiated and represented by its two most brilliant theorists does not help the readers' and/or the audience's interpretations. This conception of intertextuality that does not open the text to history, that consists in an entropic sort of textualism, in a self-enclosed deferral from text to text, cannot work as a viable analytic framework. Not only does it deal with temporality/history in a way that flattens it on the present; but it also takes pleasure in a co-habitation of inter-texts that have no influence the one on the other/s.

Bluntly put, the semiotic view of intertextuality cannot help us understand the how and why of the re-appearance and re-use of a text in a new one. For making possible that kind of appreciation my approach will be informed, as anticipated before, by the perspective of philosophical hermeneutics, while safely relying on the heuristic tools provided by Genette's by-now classic literary theory of intertextuality.

Mary Orr's book on intertextuality devotes a final paragraph to European hermeneutics, where she opportunely re-proposes a statement by Ricoeur that effectively points out the 'elemental' difference in the approaches of semiotics and hermeneutics to the world of the text and, more broadly, to intertextuality: "the object of semiotics - the sign - is merely virtual. Only the sentence is *actual* as the very *event of speaking*" (Orr 2003, 65; emphasis added). Orr appreciatively highlights in it the return to "the singularity of predication", with its speaker and addressees; I also like to underline how, in Ricoeur's phrasing of it, we see immediately conjured up for us a subject doing/performing something with words, performing "the advent of a world", as "event" is described by Ricoeur in the same paragraph. To continue with the philosopher's own words: "[l]anguage, by being actualized in discourse, surpasses itself as a system" - (which is the elective frame of semiotics) - "and realizes itself as event, so too discourse, by entering the process of understanding, surpasses itself as event and becomes meaning" (Ricoeur 1991, 74-5).

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**3** Cf. Barthes 1977, 160: "A text is woven entirely with citations, references, echoes, cultural languages (what language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, which cut across it through and through in a vast stereophony. The intertextual in which every text is held, it itself being the text-between of another text, is not to be confused with some origin of the text: [...] the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet already read; they are quotations without inverted commas".

Against the double allergy of post-structural views of intertextuality to taking into account the presence of historically-positioned authors and readers, a hermeneutic approach returns to valorize the *intentio auctoris*, the author's "intentionality" (not to be mistaken as his/her subjectivity or psychology), and his/her "re-accentuation" (Bakhtin 1982) of the quoted/re-used text/s, of course without presuming to attribute to it the last say on the meanings of the reprise; it returns to valorize the readers' role, their 'prejudices' and their 'exposing themselves' to the foreignness of the adapted text; it returns to valorize the *intentio operis*, whose re-appropriations, while testifying to the re-appropriated text's semantic potential, assure new blood and life to it. In particular, Gadamer's concepts of prejudice, horizon, fusion of horizons, otherness, classic, tradition, in their being forged by history, turn out to provide essential aid when analyzing theatrical adaptations of classics like *Molara*. Above all, we will see how fruitful his insistence on the "tension"<sup>4</sup> that must subsist between the present horizon of the author/interpreter and the horizon of the adapted text of the past and/or of other cultures can be. Ricoeur is especially keen on Gadamer's conceptualization of this dialectics between familiarity/proximity and foreignness/distance that should be entailed in a fusion of intertextual/intercultural horizons capable of respecting differences.

It is this awareness of non-coincidence of temporalities, of different horizons, that helps avoid poor and simplifying presentifications and perform that kind of actualization of the classic that makes of it a classic. The re-used text should not get drowned into the waters of monodimensional present or sheer synchrony, the present text should not be made to disappear under the burden of the monumentalized classic. The two, and their respective horizons should come to share a substantial equality, and the power of reciprocal influence.

Presentification abolishes any sort of dialogue and dialectics between quoted and quoting texts, it makes the first immediately and suspiciously available and 'disposable'. Actualization, or re-accentuation, which is what Farber has realized with her intertextual work, does not presume to abolish all otherness and tries not to reduce the depth of the quoted text and, even more importantly, its opening on to the spectator/the reader's world of possibility.

The task of hermeneutics [...] is twofold: to reconstruct the internal dynamic of the text, and to restore to the work its ability to project itself outside in the representation of the world that I could inhabit. (Ricoeur 1991, 18)

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<sup>4</sup> For Gadamer's notions and terminology the reference throughout the essay is to *Warheit und Methode* (1960), *Truth and Method* (2009).

What follows will deal with the how and the why in Farber's use of intertextuality in *Molora*.

### 3 The Intertextual Phenomenology of *Molora*

I believe that in tackling *Molora's* intertextual phenomenology Farber's *Foreword* to its published version deserves being included among its intertexts. It is certainly a programmatic paratext that sheds light on the playwright's 'intentionality' (to stay with the hermeneutic vocabulary). After pointing at the exceptional, though fragile, character, in our vengeful world, of the TRC experience in South Africa's transition into democracy, and censoring the "reductive notions of a miraculously forgiving Rainbow Nation", she singles out its protagonists in "the common everyman and everywoman who [...] gathered in modest halls across the country to face their perpetrators across a table, and find a way forward for us all" (Farber 2008, 15). She then proceeds to explain the place of *Oresteia* in her play:

The ancient *Oresteia* trilogy tells the story of the rightful heirs to the House of Atreus, dispossessed of their inheritance. Forced to live as a servant in the halls of her own father's house, Elektra waits for her brother Orestes to return from exile to the land of his ancestors and take back what is rightfully theirs. The premise of this ancient story was striking to me as a *powerful canvas on which to explore the history of dispossession, violence and human-rights violations* in the country I grew up in. I had long been interested in *creating a work that explores the journey back from the dark heart of unspeakable trauma and pain – and the choices facing those shattered by the past.* (15-16; emphasis added)

Those "common everyman and everywoman" are embodied in the play in the Chorus of seven Xhosa elderly women, whom Farber will later also qualify as "the matriarchs of South Africa, who would sit and stoically listen, and absorb the pain for the community". In the same interview, she attributes the creative spark for composing *Molora* to her intense, moved "bewilderment" at the "spiritual sophistication" behind the TRC event, at its "very humble", "ritual" beginning of "the healing of the entire community" (Woods 2010, 5).

As a matter of fact, the words of this re-invented, indigenized chorus, together with its crucial modes of participation, as discussed later on, constitute one of the three major inter-texts syncretically imbricated and, at times, blended or amalgamated in the play. The Greek 'canvas' – mainly drawn from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Libation Bearers*, first of all, but also from the two *Electra* by Sophocles and Euripides – is the classic intertext already introduced;

then, last but not least, we have the intertext of the TRC hearings (translator included), which provides the enclosing framework of the play. The three are not subordinated the one to the others. Finally, there is the extra-text represented by the social and historical context of the author and the audience's present time, renovated at each new performance and being always actively involved.

### 3.1 The Intertextual *Mise en scène*

Farber's second paratext entitled *Mise en scène* (25) contains her stage directions and is quite uncompromising as to the following requirements: that the "work should never be played on a raised stage [...] but on the floor to a raked audience"; that "the contact with the audience must be immediate, and dynamic, with the audience complicit", that is, "experiencing the story as witnesses or participants in the room, rather than as voyeurs"; that "the ideal venue" should be "a bare hall or room - much like the drab, simple venues" chosen for the TRC hearings, "with two large tables facing each other from the opposite ends of the performance space" upon which "a microphone on a stand" is to be placed. Then, "along the back of the playing area, upstage and facing the audience" are the seven, austere chairs for the women of the Chorus, the community.

This scenography iconically re-actualizing the TRC trial-like space, then, is made to share the stage with "a low platform" in between the two tables, demarcating an-other inter-space, i.e. "the area in which the past memory will be re-enacted": at its centre, a "grave filled with the red sand of Africa", and besides it, "an old pickaxe".

So, Farber's own directions demonstrate how her play's *mise en scène* is itself conceived of and experienced as an inter-textual scenic space, made of imbricated different spaces which have the additional function of marking the different times of the TRC and of the Greek tale. A beautiful example of Farber's interrelating spaces as a way to spatialize time, is to be found in the very first scene ("testimony"). Here we witness the first confrontation between the testimony of white Klytemnestra, the perpetrator, and the testimony of black Elektra, the victim. The latter ends with lines adapted from Sophocles' *Electra* (245-6):<sup>5</sup>

For if the dead lie in dust| and nothingness, | while the guilty pay  
not with blood for | blood - | Then we are nothing but history with-  
out | a future. (Farber 2008, 31)

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<sup>5</sup> The line numbers are those given by Farber herself in footnote and are drawn from the Loeb Classical Library parallel editions of the relevant texts: *Aeschylus*, vol. 2, 1957; *Sophocles*, vol. 2, 1961; *Euripides*, vol. 3, 1998.

At this point, they leave their tables and “step onto the earthen floor”, described above. “With this gesture” – Farber writes – “mother and daughter commit to the process of unearthing the past”. The journey of exploration is going deep into darkness.

An important premise to make before examining the rhetorical devices of intertextuality employed by Farber, is that the Chorus speaks and sings in isi-Xhosa (the Nguni language most widely distributed in South Africa), white Klitemnestra speaks exclusively in English, while black Elektra and Orestes speak both languages, moving between the two. In the first scene, a man sitting among the Chorus women steps forward to act as ‘translator’ into Xhosa of small portions of Klytemnestra’s speech but, after that, he stops translating. All Xhosa lines in the published text are immediately followed by their version in English, but, noticeably, this does not always happen in the performance text. In this multilingualism one cannot but read a postcolonial intention, a direct reference, that is, to the racialized language typical of the colonial and Apartheid regimes. At one and the same time, Farber’s audience is also reminded of the multiple languages (besides Afrikaans and English, the many ethnic languages of South Africa) in which testimonies were given at the TRC, which required the presence of translators. Still, there is no need to emphasize how this switching and imbricating of languages cannot but heighten the inter-linguistic network of the play, thus strongly contributing to its structural intertextuality.

### 3.2 The Intertextual Rhetorical Devices

As to the rhetorical interweaving of texts that takes place on stage, those with an immediate, discursive impact are verbatim or adapted quotations from English translations of the Greek tragedies, as mentioned before. The published play contains a *Note on the Quotations* in which Farber gives the extended references of the editions from which she has drawn her “patchwork of quotations” (22), flagged up in the footnotes with initials (there are also very few quotes whose source she marks as unknown because she has not been able to retrieve them). Sometimes, the translated lines are spoken by a character different from the one who speaks them in the source text, as in the very opening of the play, when Klitemnestra’s exordium “A great ox – as they say – | Stands on my tongue”, as well as her immediately following quoted lines, in *Agamemnon* are famously pronounced by the Watchman.

The repetition of words that characterizes quotations, as we know, is the very essence of any intertextual work. However, the “graphic factor” (Berardelli 2013, 29) that is expected to accompany any quotation (by means of inverted commas or italics) in that it graphically



delimits them within the quoting text, are not used in *Molora*'s published text and the effect, for the reader, is exactly that of contravening the two main implications of quotations: their literalness/faithfulness, and their separateness. But, of course, Farber's rewriting has espoused on principle margins of 'infidelity' to the original and, anyway, graphic delimitations would have spoilt the intertextual effect in the linguistic orchestration.

Farber also uses another structural rhetorical device of intertextuality, allusion, which is not graphically signalled in the published version. Allusion does not presume to be faithfully literal, and gets more easily amalgamated in the quoted text. In *Molora* we have allusions to the Greek texts when we perceive re-phrasings, or variations from the source texts.

Allusions, even more than quotations, implicitly presume cultural complicity on the audience's part, who is supposed to be able to share in a common "literary memory" (Berardelli 2013, 35) and, more generally, in a common cultural memory, especially if one takes into account the kind of dynamic involvement of her spectators pursued by Farber. From this point of view, it must be said, though cursorily, that she has relied on South African audiences' familiarity both with ancient Greek drama in general, perceived as 'un-English' and even close to the African culture,<sup>6</sup> and with many important African and, especially, South African adaptations of it. During the Apartheid regime, in particular, adapting from Greek tragedies could serve the cause of resistance theatre because less in danger of being censored.

In any case, quotations and allusions from the ancient Greek drama are distributed all along the main text, being spoken in English by Klytemnestra, in Xhosa and English by Elektra and Orestes, exclusively in Xhosa by the women of the Chorus: they weave a net that at many points overlaps, as it were, with the intercultural Xhosa net. Out of a sort of intertextual/intercultural syncretic 'equanimity', Farber adapts, also, from the Xhosa ritual language. In this case, the complicity with the spectators' cultural horizon may more easily

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<sup>6</sup> On the presence of Greek tragedy in the African educational curricula and its relevance in the African and, more to our point, South African culture see especially Wetmore (2002, 30 ff.) and van Weyenberg (2013, XIX ff.). The fact that it came to the African continent through colonialism has inevitably informed the cultural and political complexity of its reception and adaptation, since Classics were upheld as the cradle of civilization legitimately inherited by the British and legitimating Britain's and, broadly, Europe's superiority and dominance. Yet, at the same time "the colonizers themselves had borrowed and appropriated from the Greeks, but had not created them" (Wetmore 2002, 32). This un-Englishness of Attic playwrights in the African context, as pointed out, among others, by Soyinka (1976) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986, 90), has kept it safe from the post-colonial/post-independence and Afrocentric rejection of the Western canon. Wetmore, in particular, examines "the relevant issues within Greek tragedy and myth which *predispose* Greek tragedy to be ideal for adaptation into the African cultural context" (Wetmore 2002, 34 ff.).

activate a larger margin of foreignness, which is what makes possible, through their exposure to it, their experiencing an enlargement of their own horizon. The postcolonial strategy entailed in Farber's use or negation of translation when multilingualism and multiculturalism are involved, effectively participates in the syncretic interplay of proximity and distance activated by her intertextual rewriting. Of course, from this point of view, *Molora*, as the Classical Reception Studies scholar Decreus has held, cannot but engage us to

complement the internal Western vision we developed of ourselves and of Classics (too often relying upon essentialism and universalism), with an external one: an appreciation coming from abroad, from intercultural and post-colonial perspectives. This might amount to a beautiful exercise in informing us of our place in history and culture (2007, 263-4).

### 3.3 In a Palimpsestic Frame

At this point of our survey of *Molora*'s intertextual rhetoric, it may be fruitful to call Genette's heuristic tools into play. Farber's use of allusions and interpolations of old and new texts are even more 'palimpsestic' in character than quotations. In the frame of Genette's general "transtextual" grammar, they are part of a larger *hypertextual*, i.e. intertextual, project: a "direct transformation" in the form of a "re-writing", that we might even see as extended into a "continuation". For the sake of methodological clarity, Genette distinguishes between formal and thematic intertextual transformations. *Molora* perfectly demonstrates the actual impossibility of discussing the two dimensions separately.

All the main intertextual operations dealt with by Genette in *Palimpsestes* in describing what he defines as "serious", i.e. non satiric, farcical or comical, "transformations", can be traced in *Molora*. So, we have "transtyliation" through the work of selection, condensation, and montage made by the playwright, that has resulted into the flowing and blending of quotations, allusions, and interpolated new text just described above.

Then, Genette's "thematic transpositions" or "thematic transformations" are those mainly provoked by the work made on the hypotext (the preceding text)'s actions or narrated events, as well as on its historical-geographical background. These more "pragmatic" transformations are those more responsible for what Genette defines as "transvalorization", which is a swerve, change, or even an overthrow of the "values" upheld in the hypotext. In *Molora*, besides the thematic transposition due to the re-contextualization in the post-apartheid South Africa of the TRC, definitely the most radical transformation of

this type is the blocking or suspension of the matricide of the Greek tale, which means a rejection of that hypotext's 'values', its cyclical/circular logic of revenge.

This most dramatic change, however, is prepared by other trans-valorizing actions in Farber's dramaturgy – actions of words as much as of deeds that cause creative transformations in our perception of the characters. Here the interplay of distance and proximity, and the creative tension it engenders between the Greek hypotext and Farber's rewriting of it, are hermeneutically very complex, and would deserve a much larger space of discussion. Let's say that Farber respects and embraces the complexity that Clytemnestra's character is given by Aeschylus. She is perfectly aware of how "Greek tragedy provides a host of intriguing and challenging female leads of a psychological complexity rarely encountered in the Western theatrical repertoire, certainly before Ibsen" (Revermann 2008, 110).<sup>7</sup> That said, Farber actualizes that complexity: we, and the Chorus, watch her ruthless torturing of Elektra through water-boarding or by bruising her with her cigarettes to force her to confess where she has taken and hidden the infant Orestes; we watch her cracking her sjambok (a whip iconic of Afrikaner arrogance and domination) at her black daughter, whom she and her lover Aegysthus keep as a domestic slave in the house of Atreus. But we are also made to listen to *her own* story, which in *Agamemnon* is told, instead, by the Chorus in the opening ode: and it is a terrible story of victimization and unspeakable suffering, told with new and ancient, adapted words:

Let me tell you about this Bitch – and how she met the man you call father. There are things you do not know about me child: a History that was written long before you were born. I was not always Klytemnestra who carried this curse. Before your father – I was married to a man I loved – with a child – my first born. [...] I met your father the day he opened up my first husband and ripped out his guts.

He tore this – my firstborn from my breast. Then holding the child by its new ankles – he smashed its tiny head against a rock. Then took me for his wife. Ah, my daughter, he that begat you murdered more than one of my children. For well you know – years later he would slit your own sister's throat as a sacrifice for peace.

PEACE? WHOSE PEACE?

It is an old and terrible world, and I feel its pain. (2008, 21; emphasis in the text)

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<sup>7</sup> Revermann, a classicist and Theatre Study scholar, defines *Molora* as "a milestone of creative appropriation from the [African] continent]" (Revermann 2008, 117 fn. 12).

We are witnesses, above all, in the crucial scene entitled “truth”, of the striking new text written for her by Farber: her plea to Elektra, who is determined to “play out destiny”: “You stupid girl, you witless child – | You know not what you do. | Already the darkness is in your eyes. | You become me. You choose the curse”; and of her desperate words to Orestes: “Nothing...nothing is written. | Do not choose to be me” (2008, 79-80).

There is no need, I believe, to highlight how the intensely dramatic passages above are striking evidence of Farber’s creative use of the proximity/distance dynamic triggered by intertextuality. In a similar way, the audience and the Chorus are witnesses of a transformation in Elektra that Farber has created by interpolating Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* with Sophocles’ and Euripides’ *Electra*. She follows the latter’s example in giving Clytemnestra’s daughter more space, more action. But she does more than that: she puts Elektra on stage from the very beginning and shows, through her heart-wrenching suffering, how her obdurate, fierce thirst for bloody revenge is making of her a new perpetrator.

And as to her brother Orestes, again, while maintaining the misgivings qualifying him in contrast to his sister, that are in the Greek texts, we witness an intensification of his dread of kin-killing in spite of his having received the matricidal order from Apollo himself. Fascinatingly, a substantial contribution to this comes from the simple but deep questions addressed to him by the Xhosa woman who raised him while in exile, as soon as he has returned from his axe-killing of Aegisthus (metonymically symbolized on the stage by a pair of large boots filled with blood). Translated, they read: “My child! Why do you kill? A human being should never be murdered. Do you know that human blood will haunt you always? Never kill again” (2008, xv: vengeance, 76-7).

#### **4 The Xhosa Transcultural Text and Syncretic Theatre**

The creative transformations seen above are made possible by the Xhosa intertext and, so, by the transcultural energy it brings to the play. Let’s see how.

Accompanied by the sound of *uhadi* (calabash bow), an elderly woman of the Chorus opens the play with her soft singing “Ho laphalal’ igazi”, the Xhosa version of “Blood has been spilt here”. This soft but sombre beginning will be replaced by the Chorus’s explosive song of triumph celebrating the stopping of the vengeful cycle, in the final scene (xix: rises), just before the epilogue spoken by Clytemnestra. In between there are nineteen short, titled scenes that move back and forth between the testimonies given by Clytemnestra and Elektra and set in the TRC trial framework. They re-enact events belonging both to the Greek ‘script’, such as the murder of Agamemnon, and to the

Apartheid ‘script’, such as the previously-mentioned tortures inflicted by Clytemnestra on Elektra by waterboarding, cigarette burns, and the infamous “wet bag method”. At one TRC session, the wet bag method of torture had been the subject of zealous demonstration, televised throughout the country, on the part of one perpetrator during his testimony: a grim play-within-the play, in *Molora*, but also, for many commentators, in the theatrical ‘staging’ of the TRC.<sup>8</sup> Imbricated with these testimonies are other scenes set in the present of the play’s audience, taken largely from the *Oresteia* material and including Clytemnestra and Elektra’s violent confrontation at Agamemnon’s grave; Orestes’ arrival in disguise at Clytemnestra’s palace, bringing the ashes he passes off as her dead son’s; Orestes’s *anagnorisis* and reunion with Elektra at Agamemnon’s grave; their matricidal plot, its being foiled by the Xhosa matriarchs of the Chorus.

This daring interrelation and blending of time planes leads us to perceive the Greek tale of the fatal cycle of bloodshed as all-too-present to us, to our contemporary world. And here I cannot refrain from quoting a reflection of Farber’s expressed more than once, on “how far we *haven’t* come in two and a half thousand years” (Woods 2010, 7, emphasis added). On the other end, significantly, the Xhosa intertext, which is given a symbolically substantial pride of place in the Prologue and in the final scene, is not really perceived by the audience as linked to a specific time plan, as if its wisdom were timeless. Its presence is made pervasive by the Chorus as re-invented by Farber and through all the Xhosa ritual moments interspersed in the play. In saying this we come to deal with a kind of intertextuality that is conspicuously not left to words alone.

The ancestral, unearthly sound traditionally cultivated by the Ngqoko Cultural group of the Xhosa ethnic community – the so-called split-tone or overtone singing – in which the women from the rural Tranksei chosen by the playwright for embodying the Chorus have been trained from their childhood, has become the soundscape of *Molora*. Together with other traditional types of Xhosa songs and instruments (mouth bow, calabash, mouth harp, milking drum), this “sonic wisdom”, as Farber has called it (Woods 2010, 4) plays a fundamental part in orienting our interpretative attitude to the performance text. Like the chorus in Attic drama, *Molora*’s Chorus witnesses the characters’ plight, sings, and dances, but, unlike the first, the latter intervenes, interacts with the actors and participates in the play’s action.

There are quite intense Xhosa ritual moments in *Molora*, that even when unfamiliar are felt to be crucial, worth the effort of overcoming

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<sup>8</sup> See, in particular, Cole (2007)’s reflections on the theatrical dimension and dramaturgic ‘liturgy’ accrued in TRC hearings.

their foreignness, as in the “initiation” scene (ix), when the Chorus dances and sings for Orestes the traditional song for male initiates returning from the bush, and Orestes drops his blanket to reveal a body covered in the white ash of the Xhosa initiate into manhood. Or as in scene xi: “found”, where Orestes, on his father’s grave, spits traditional beer in honour of the Ancestors and lights Mphepo, the herb that is burnt when communing with them. This rituality has nothing exotic about it, but it also contrasts with the moments of primitive rituality that can be read in Clytemnestra’s covering “her expressionless face, arms, and hands in blood” after killing Agamemnon (ii: “murder”), or in Elektra and Orestes’ “play[ing] at being wolves together – rolling sensuously in the sand on one another” (66), after quoting adapted lines from *Libation Bearers* (420-2) “We’re bred from her, like wolves, whose savage hearts do not relent”, “her” referring to their mother.

The rich, transcultural intertextuality of *Molora* is celebrated by Ranjan Gosh, who, in making his points in ways strongly reminiscent of the hermeneutic concepts mentioned before, puts forth a healthy warning against playing down, rather than valorizing, the quantum of “strangeness”, the “liminality” implied by *trans*-. “[w]ith *trans*- comes the cognitive shift”, the “[transcultural encounters [that]] creatively destabilize our received understanding of cultural formations and unsettle easy syncretic and synthetic tendencies in the construction of socio-literary significancies” (Gosh 2012, 260).

Involving, as it does, rituality, multilingualism, performative orality, body semanticization, music, dance and body language, and, as far as the spatial dramaturgy is concerned, the anti-proscenium preference for the empty stage, the Xhosa intertext of *Molora* and, more broadly, Farber’s radical adaptation are a beautiful embodiment of the postcolonial theatrical syncretism of the kind studied by Christopher Balme just a few years before *Molora*’s debut. We might reformulate it as that programmatic strategy for fashioning a new form of theatre in the light of postcolonial and post-Apartheid experience. To quote Balme directly:

Syncretic theatre is one of the most effective means of decolonizing the stage, because it utilizes the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a *creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to one tradition or the other* (Balme 1999, 2; emphasis added).

One can say of *Molora* what Balme says about the Nigerian playwright Ola Rotimi’s renowned Oedipus adaptation *The Gods are not to Blame* (1971) and its engaging with the Yoruba culture, that “the [indigenous] intertextuality links with the Greek model establish resonances which transcend a simple ethnographic replication” (Balme

1999, 133). Quite to the point, too, is Balme's invitation to abandon the distinction, so characteristic of Western theatrical theory, between ritual and theatre: "[i]nstead of opposing ritual and theatre as two phenomenologically mutually exclusive activities, it may be more useful to see the two phenomena as located on a performative continuum" (67). As a matter of fact, *Molora* makes particularly cogent Keir Elam's observation according to which "the written text/performance text relationship is not one of simple priority but a complex of reciprocal constraints constituting a powerful *intertextuality*" (Elam 1980, 191; emphasis in the text).

## 5 The TRC Text and the Claims of Tragedy

If the concept of a performative continuum between ritual and theatre can be safely applied to the very nature of ancient Greek drama, it has also been problematically and disquietingly applied to the TRC hearings, which *Molora* so disturbingly re-enacts while programmatically refraining from engaging in the Christian concept of forgiveness and in the Christian inflection of reconciliation that figured so prominently in the TRC project. In point of fact, the issue of forgiveness is definitely not raised by the play. Instead, as very opportunely observed by Vellino, Weiswiz 2013, 120, "Farber indigenizes, de-Christianizes, and re-writes the TRC process by casting the chorus as 'guardians' of the rural Xhosa culture".

As commented above, they are taken to represent ordinary African women and men. In addition to this, it is of relevance to be aware of the fact that the Xhosa people are among those major South African ethnic communities who cultivate the *ubuntu* philosophy, a most important African version of humanism.

Vellino, Weiswiz 2013 hold that Farber "reopens [the TRC's] questions to suggest that the issues were far from resolved in the 'new South Africa'" (113); they take *Molora* as an intense example of "redress theatre", i.e. the post-dictatorship, post-Apartheid, post-genocide drama that responds to human-rights violations or to transitional justice efforts, at one and the same time "evok[ing] what commissions and tribunals cannot do *and* the necessity of doing redress work into the future" (116). Crucially, they also point out how plays like *Molora* "complicate oversimplified expectations for victims and perpetrators" (114) - more generally, of oversimplified notions of healing and redress. The same conclusions would be reached if *Molora* were approached as a "trial-play", too. In fact, the marshalling of the TRC iconography (the perpetrator's confession, the victim's testimony, the use of amplifying microphones, the witnessing public, the presence of a translator), the centrality of the issue of justice and debt-paying, the spotlight on the

defendant's plight, have made it 'natural' for Alexander Feldman to recruit *Molora* in the "trial-play" subgenre that "transform[s] legal-historical events into theatre" (Feldman 2017, 279), that kind of "jurisprudential drama" that has been proliferating from the second half of the twentieth century. Concerning this, one important precedent on the post-Apartheid stage, that should be taken into account as far as the intertextual relationship between plays is concerned, is South African Yugu Yourgrau's *The Song of Jacob Zulu* (1993), largely inspired by *Oresteia*.<sup>9</sup> One should also observe that other plays, besides *Molora*, have dealt with the TRC in one way or another.

The point I think worthwhile insisting on is that *Molora* grapples with issues that, while including and stigmatizing the binary racial-logic opposition of Apartheid, are larger and more challenging, and cannot be reductively contained in a postcolonial counter-discursive logic.<sup>10</sup> *Molora* is born out of a humanist *angst*, from the dire need to believe in a project of humanity that can be "attuned to transhistorical and transcultural experience": an "agonistic humanism", in Lorna Hardwick's perfect words, "that is neither reductive nor pessimist nor a synonym for an imposition of "universal" as its defining characteristic" (2015, 158, 159). Farber is perfectly lucid about the legitimacy of the criticisms levelled at the TRC from various quarters, still, in her own words, "it was a beginning: the genesis of that first idea. 'We do have a choice in how to respond to violence'. And *Molora* is an attempt to express that beginning". She hopes that her play will "raise the question of choice in a dilemma" by taking the spectators "through visceral, vicarious experience of 'What would I do?'". But she does not end her play on a note of harmony. 'Her' children stand up and help their mother to her feet, but they do not embrace her. Clytemnestra remains on one side, 'graced' ("We are still only here by grace alone") but left to the burden of her memory and her conscience. Again, in Farber's words, "there are no hugs [...] the challenge begins, not ends" (Woods 2010, 7).

In their introduction to an MLA number devoted to exploring if tragedy as a literary genre can still speak to present urgencies, the guest editors Foley and Howard rehearse Raymond Williams's rejection, in *Modern Tragedy* (1979), of George Steiner's well-known thesis in his *The Death of Tragedy* (1961), according to which tragedy is unthinkable in our modern world abandoned by the gods, and they

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<sup>9</sup> The entire action of this play was structured as a trial exploring the dehumanization and degradation brought by the Apartheid system to all South Africa. Noticeably, its chorus was the acclaimed a capella *isicathamisa* singers of the Ladysmith Black Mambazo group, who, like in the original Greek tragedy, worked as a *trait-d'union* with the audience, narrating and commenting on the action through chants.

<sup>10</sup> This point is well argued by van Weyenberg (2013, xlvi-l), who extends it to include all African adaptations of Greek tragedies.



invite us to consider, instead, how “tracing the multiple ways that non-Western cultures have redefined, re-appropriated, and reinvigorated the genre has become central to scholarship on tragedy”, including Farber’s play among their examples (2014, 626).

In my view, *Molora* maintains authentic links with the tragic genre. Not all critics would agree on this point, because of its ending, in which the Xhosa intertext appears to prevail over the Greek one. Yet, it is important to observe that it is a suspended ending. After remarking the crucial role played by classical tragedy as a source of inspiration for resistance theatre (all centred on defiance and commitment to struggle) during the Apartheid era, Loren Kruger reflects on “whether the post-apartheid era might appear to have escaped the threat of catastrophe and thus the grasp of tragedy”, and dwells on *Molora*’s problematic generic identity (2012, 335). She proceeds to consider what was under Farber’s eyes, too, that is, the failure of the epic of the Rainbow Nation due to the persistence of iniquity and injustice, especially when caused by those who were former victims of the regime. It is in the light of this and of *Molora*’s new ending, that Kruger poses a problem of generic instability for it. In a similar way, Odom observes that “[the] temporary cessation of violence is not a reconciliation or a cathartic resolution to a tragedy: indeed, the mix of Greek tragic form and reconciliation aesthetics prevents either of these forms from reaching a closure” (2011, 49-50). I would like to advance the objection that the word “reconciliation”, as much as “forgiveness”, is never spoken in the play, unlike the word “truth”, which stands out as *the* thematic word in it. And though I do not share in Kruger’s generic ‘hesitancy’, I have thoughtfully dwelt on her following consideration:

The incomplete revolution casts a shadow on aspirations for reconciliation in South Africa. This shadow assumes tragic shape both in the experience of sacrifice if not of sheer loss, in the death or grievous harm suffered by thousands in the struggle against injustice [...], and in the struggle to see this loss as significant for the living. (2012, 359-60)

It is, in fact, this experience of sheer loss, loss of humanity, loss for humanity – Clytemnestra’s “Done is done”, repeated many times – that remains tragic. The tragic theme of indelible loss is intensely conveyed in the pleading words Elektra addresses to her mother, before hardening into the next perpetrator: “I want only to know you. | Who you were before the hurting ... | *Who we could have been*” (47; emphasis added).

The play closes on an honest note of suspension, made possible by the Chorus women when, with their voices and their bodies, they take possession of the stage: they force Orestes to drop the axe, and

overpower Elektra in a powerful embrace that leaves her in tears. Clytemnestra remains as if stunned at this unexpected subversion of fate, the “rewriting of the ancient end” she herself had hopelessly implored, from her children. The diviner in the Chorus sings a prayer to the Ancestors to invoke “for our children” –including the audience’s children – the strength “to stop crime” and, above all, “to speak the truth” (85).

The suspension on what might be, more than of what might have been, re-engages choice, and “the power to-be” (Ricoeur 1991, 293) instantiated by Farber’s intertextual opening onto possible different ways of being human. But *Molora* remains a tragedy: what remains tragic until its very end is the truth explored in its “journey back from the dark heart of unspeakable trauma and pain” (Farber 2008, 16), the truth on what man can be – the kind of journey also undertaken by the TRC in South Africa.

*Molora* re-enacts what Revermann perceives in ancient Greek theatre: “extreme theatre” for extreme times, “exploring as it does extremes of human suffering and subjecting them to intense reflection” (113-14). The challenge it leaves us with is that of finding the way for abysmal suffering and for sheer loss *not to have been in vain*. The ash falling in the silenced and darkened theatre on the audience as well as on the actors at the end of the performance is there to remind us of the ash falling “on New York City after September 11”, and “on “Hiroshima, Baghdad, Palestine, Rwanda, Bosnia, the concentration camps of Europe” (16) ..., as long as our memory is not commemorative, but critical and *revolutionary* (see Ricoeur’s epigraph). The way *Molora*’s intertextuality has our present transculturally interrogate the past and rekindle “thwarted, even massacred potentialities” (see Genette’s epigraph), certainly is.

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