

Charles Mee's Intertextual and Intercultural Inscriptions: The Suppliants Vs Big Love*

by **Dr Savas Patsalidis** from Aristotle University, Greece

Life [...] is an experience we share with others
Charles Mee, *Big Love*

I: Despite (or because of) the political, technological and other radical changes in our postmodern times, theatre artists from all over the world still turn to the Greek classics, perhaps more frequently than any of their predecessors, with a variety of motives.^[1] Some are attracted by the material or the character of the original which in many cases has led to a new version, a self standing work. Others are tempted by the possibilities of restoring the original vision and effect of a play which they deem to have become obscured or distorted (Innes 248, 249).

Their claim is that no matter how timely some of the classical themes appear to be, the passage of time and social change inevitably leave their mark. As Peter Sellars claims, prefacing the run of his Gulf War adaptation of Aeschylus' *The Persians* (1993), "a classic is a house we' re still living in. And as with any old house, you're going to fix it up and add a new wing. It's not an exhibit. It's meant to be lived in, and not admired" (in Lahr 103). Which means that to make this old house a home to reflect the social, political and aesthetic parameters of the contemporary, it takes redecorating, repainting, refashioning, new mirrors, new sofas, new sound and lighting systems, new words, high tech gadgets and spectacular iconography, popular and high culture (Green 173).

Charles Mee is one of those tenants who has no problems redecorating and refashioning an old house in order to give it a new relevance. His whole *oeuvre* is based on the belief that "There is no such a thing as an original play [...] culture writes us first, and then we write our stories" (2004: 2). I know of no other playwright who, in this day of controversy over copyright law violation, invites his readers to

visit his website (www.panix.com/~meejr), take his texts and "cut them up, rearrange them, rewrite them, throw things out, put things in, do whatever you like with them; and then please, put your own name to the work that results."

II: Charles Mee (born in 1938 in Evanston, IL) began flirting with writing after contracting polio as a teenager, an event that turned him from a 160-pound football player to a 90-pound invalid. While in the hospital, one of his teachers brought him a copy of Plato's *Symposium* which, as he confesses in his memoir *A Nearly Normal Life*, resulted in a change to his plans for the future. He writes: "As I lay in bed, I had come to understand that whatever vague plans I may once have had to make my way in the world with my body were now useless. Henceforth, I would have to use my head. And my head was empty. And so I filled it with Plato [...] Before I could hold a book with all my fingers, I had read all of Plato" (1999: 32).

His first plays were performed at the Writers' Stage Company (*Constantinople Smith. Anyone! Anyone!*, 1962), at the old La MaMa in its earliest days at Saint Mark's Church in the Bowery (*The Gate*, 1963), at Café Cino, among other non commercial places. In the mid-Sixties he had become increasingly caught up in anti-Vietnam activities which, as he says, "led to political act, which led to political writing, which led to historical writing" (2002: 102). He spent the next twenty years writing political history books that "were essentially about the behavior of America in the world and how that came home to damage life and politics in America" (Mee 2002: 102) —*The Ohio Gang* 1980, *The End of Order* 1980, *Meeting at Potsdam* 1974, *Erasmus* 1971, to mention a select few. In 1982 he decided to go back to writing theatre, which for him meant to write what he felt was true and what felt good to him, hoping that it might feel good to someone else (Mee 2002: 102).

His first play came out two years later —*The Investigation of the Murder in El Salvador* (in *Wordplays*, PAJ Publications). In 1986 he had his first major production

at the Public Theatre with the play *Vienna: Lusthaus* (Obie Award for Best Play). In the years to follow Mee wrote sixteen more plays,[2] some based on Greek myths,[3] others on European and American literary and political history,[4] others on love (chiefly *Big Love*, *First Love* and *True Love*.), which, as one of his directors, Matthew Wilder, admits, fly so low beneath the accepted radar that no conventional means seem adequate to decipher them (41).

The idea of Elaine Scarry that a body in pain tends to resist linear logic and neat structures (4, 9), applies here. Mee makes the connection between the body of his writing (the semantics of his dramatic performance) and the materiality of his (suffering) body this way. "When I had polio my life changed in an instant and forever. My life was not shaped by Freudian psychology; it was shaped by a virus. And it was no longer well made. It seemed far more complex a project than any of the plays I was seeing. And so, in my own work, I've stepped somewhat outside the traditions of American theatre in which I grew up to find a kind of dramaturgy that [would make me feel at home], welcome and happy and sane and not judged wanting" (in Erin Mee 93, 97).

Inventive, joyous, downright entertaining, subversive, exceedingly clever, thrillingly unpredictable, insanely discursive, provocative, poetic, highly theatrical,

[2] His complete works are published on the Internet and continuously updated.

[3] *Requiem for the Dead* (based on the fragments of Sophocles' lost plays), *Orestes* (1992, first directed by Tina Landau and staged at the American Repertory Theatre), *The Bacchae* (1993, first directed by Brian Kulick and produced at the Mark Taper Forum's Festival in Los Angeles), *Agamemnon*, based on Euripides and Berlioz's *Les Troyens* (1994, first directed by Brian Kulick and produced by the Actors' Gang in Los Angeles), *The Trojan Women: A Love Story* (1996, directed by Tina Landau and produced by En Garde Arts in New York), *Big Love* (2000, Humana Festival).

[4] *The War to End War* (1993, directed by Matthew Wilder, Sledgehammer Theatre, San Diego), *The Imperialists at the Club Cave Canem* (1988, directed by Erin Mee and produced at HOME and at the Public Theatre in New York), *The Berlin Circle* (based on Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, 1998—retitled in 2000 as *Full Circle*, directed by Tina Landau and produced at Steppenwolf), *bobrauschenbergamerica* (2001), among others.

political, these are only a few of the terms used by critics to describe the work of this historian-turned-playwright for whom the causal constructions and positivist explanations of standard historical discourse leave much to be desired. The invented or constructed and the "found" or evidential are always a matter of dispute or interpretation, an idea that seems to be in accord with what Hayden White writes in his *Tropics of Discourse* (1978), that historical narratives are verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences; hence, the deliberate "messiness" and undisguised arbitrariness of his plays, where the most unexpected people (and their stories) compete for our attention and assent. Legendary figures, poets, politicians (*The War to End War*, *Berlin Circle*), embittered homosexuals, Mexican pistoleros, negroes castrated in their cradle by rat bites, Choruses by Third World women making computer components or leaping, shouting and clapping to Zulu Jive music, classical heroes in standard State Department pin-striped suits (*The Trojan Women*), Butof performers, animal trainers, operatic singers from South America, Japan, Indonesia or China, a transvestite Dionysus in a white pleated linen skirt, combat boots and a gold cigarette holder, old liberals (who speak well and truly, with understanding and tolerance) like Tiresias and Kadmos in gray Brooks Brothers suits and flamboyant saffron ties (*The Bacchae*), a quadriplegic Herodotus, a dwarf or double amputee Thucydides, an epileptic Hesiod (*Agamemnon*), Electra in an Armani outfit and Helen of Troy in a canary yellow Chanel suit, who loves to exfoliate her face once a week with a product that contains oatmeal, honey, and nuts, and who later on appears in the form of a giant blow-up fuck-me doll, Pylades in a Jean Paul Gautier suit with silver threads, with earrings and Gitanes cigarettes, and Apollo with the voice of the current American president (*Orestes*). This is a representative sample of the people who inhabit Mee's recontextualized schizoid stage worlds which, as he himself admits,

are not "too neat, too finished, too presentable. They are broken, jagged, filled with sharp edges, filled with things that take sudden turns," filled with people who have been excluded from the mainstream and now have a platform from which to speak. And that feels good, he admits, it feels like life in postmodern America —with all its "shocking and pleasing and disturbing juxtapositions" (in Wren 58).[5]

In his *Poetics* Aristotle observes that drama arises from "the instinct of imitation" (55). In their own way(s), Mee's collage plays are also involved in a mimetic enterprise. Only this time, and within the postmodern cultural field with its simultaneous and contradictory stimuli, with its oppositions and destabilizing flux, the real and the original are differently defined. The arbitrariness of language together with the division that it creates between the real and our interpretation of it, forms a sea of intercultural and intertextual surfaces, a dazzling pastiche of original and recycled material, sublime and vulgar at the same time, historical and mythological, that coexist and interpenetrate, providing a multiplicity of vision —as opposed to the unity of vision and coherence of action in classical plays— that capitalizes on our practised ability to absorb simultaneous stimuli that call attention to themselves as text and rhetoric. In other words, the particles that cram together to

[5] His comments on the structuring of the text of his *Orestes* are a telling example of his pastiche method. "This piece was composed the way Max Ernst made his Fatagaga [an abbreviation for "fabrication de tabéaux garantis gazométriques"] series of pictures after World War I, so that passages of the play were inspired by or taken from twentieth-century texts by Apollinaire, William Burroughs, Cindy, Bret Easton Ellis, John Wayne Gacy, Mai Lin, Elaine Scarry, Roberto Mangabereira Unger, Vogue, and Soap Opera Digest" (1993: 29).

A similar note also accompanies his *Agamemnon*, where he admits that some of the texts were inspired or taken from the works of Hesiod, Herodotus, Thucydides, Homer, Aeschylus, Artemidorus, The Book of Revelations, Philip Vellacott, Slavenka Drakulic, Zlatko Dizdarevic, Zbigneiw Herbert, Pierre Klossowski, Georges Bataille, Sei Shonagon, and Hannah Arendt. And for his *Bacchae* we read that the text "has been based on, or taken in part from, among others, Euripides, Georges Bataille, Klaus Theweleit, Wilhelm Stekel, 'insane' texts from the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, Valerie Solanas's SCUM Manifesto, Joan Nestle's Femme-Butch texts, Pat Califia, Jeanne Cordova, Barbara Duden, Mary Maclane, Aimable Jayet, Slei Shonaon."

make up Mee's cultural and dramatic recombinations, retain their own form while participating in the active process that constitutes the work in its totality. This is the new "coherence" that Mee puts forward to replace the old one.

As in much recent American literature, Mee makes it obvious that transcendental guarantees of truth and oneness are dead. Truth appears to be the product of the struggle of local narratives vying with one another for legitimation. People are not formed just by the domestic forces Freud attempted to explain, Mee argues, but also, and more importantly, by history and culture (2003: 2). As he writes in his *Orestes*, "The nation inscribes itself in the body [...] the human body opens itself and allows the nation to be registered in the wound [...] the nation is embodied in the gestures and the postures, the customs and behavior of its citizens" (57). What he likes about the work of the Athenian tragedians is that they "Take no small problem [...] unlike so much drama on television, where there 's a small misunderstanding at the top of the hour that you know is going to be resolved [...] The Greeks start with matricide, fratricide; here's the raw material, now make a civilization out of THIS!" (2003: 2).

III: If in Science Fiction the present is read through the future and the two, in effect, become one and the same, in the case of *Big Love , or, The Wedding of the Millennium* —that premiered at the Actors' Theatre of Louisville in the 24th Humana Festival of New American Plays, in 2000, directed by Les Waters, and later on toured to the Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Long Wharf in New Haven, the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, ACT in Seattle, the Woolly Mammoth in DC, and the Next Wave Festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music— the present of a "Deleuze-like schiz-out" late- Capitalist America (Wilder 1994: 42) is read through the unified extremeness, richness and complexity of the past. The result is another "scizzy meltdown of all boundaries" (Wilder 43).

Mee's starting point is Aeschylus' play, *The Suppliants*, the oldest extant text in drama history (possibly 463 B.C), the first part of an incomplete trilogy (the other two parts being *Aegyptii* and *Danaides*)[6] that tells the story of the fifty virginal Danaids who, to avoid marrying against their wishes, flee Egypt and seek refuge in Argos, the homeland of their ancestress Io, where they ask for king Pelasgus' protection. Confronted by the unexpected geographical (re)location of the daughters of Danaus—who will later on succeed him as king of Argos—the king hesitates for he knows that if Argos gives them sanctuary, the sons of Aegyptus and all their followers will attack the city and then his fellow citizens will tell him that he "destroyed Argos for the sake of foreigners" (l. 402). "What can I do?," he wonders, "I fear either to act, or not to act"(l. 379). He does not know whether to honor the right of sanctuary even at the cost of war, or to reject his suppliants and see the altars of his gods polluted with their blood. In the end he turns for help to the people, the collective power of the *demos*. It is the first time ever that there is any reference to a "popular government," to people as the rulers of the polis. The principle behind it is that those affected by the decision should also decide on what is to be done.[7]

Aeschylus is obviously concerned about the exercise of power: Where does it reside? In law, in the people, in mutual accord, in sweet persuasion [*petho*], in domination,

[6] There are different versions of the story in circulation, yet it is Aeschylus in *The Suppliants* itself who gives us the primary evidence. It was customary for Aeschylus to introduce his main themes in the first part of the trilogy and develop them in the other two. We see this in his *Oresteia* and it is reasonable to assume that he used similar methods in the Danaid trilogy and that themes which are developed in *The Suppliants* were taken up and developed further in the succeeding plays (Winnington-Ingram 56). In the missing two-thirds of the trilogy, the myth says that the 50 grooms catch up with the Danaids, their father Danaus secretly provides them with a dagger and instructs them to kill their husbands on their wedding night, which they do, with the exception of one who is put on trial for betraying the trust of her sisters.

[7] We are not to suppose, of course, Kitto argues, "that any and every decision has to be ratified by the Argive assembly [...]. This decision is so serious and so unusual that the people, traditionally quick to blame (l. 485), would have every reason to disobey. Pelasgus is the Homeric King who knows how far he should go. The reference to the people is a means of emphasizing the seriousness of the dilemma" (10-1).

brutal violence, in marriage (Vernant 1981: 15)? To what extent are the people's comments true when they tell their King (their *anax*), that he is "the State," the "unquestioned ruler" that fears "no vote" (l. 72-4)? What is the role of reason in decision-taking and in ruling?

Issues of nationality, religion, body politics, love and sexuality, society and individual decision, are all inextricably interwoven. For example, the women's decision to run away may be an affair of the family, but, as it turns out, the state also becomes involved. By offering them sanctuary, Pelasgus brings them inside the polis, just as marriage brings them inside their husband's house. As the husbands take on the role of guardians, the King and his citizens guarantee the Danaids' protection (Zeitlin 136-42).

Mee picks up the body of the old play and its basic issues and disembodies them, wrecks them, reduces them to rubble, and then goes on to fabricate "a new play in that bed of ruins, so that the new play somehow is informed by that history and by that ruined structure, and that it really is a new play" (Mee 2003: 2). The Derridean *différance* is at work here; the gap that comes to exist in this activity of mediation between the old text and the new. It is this *différance* that serves to create the impression of the full presence of the old text and also, paradoxically and ironically, to maintain its absence.

Mee's main concern is not so much to pay any special attention to the myth itself as to give the correlations between the Aeschylean plot and current social and political issues (Hopkins and Orr 16-7), that is to comment on what is happening today, 2500 years later, regarding the plight of international refugees, the problem of political asylum, the problem of violence, gender relations, selfhood and otherness and, of course, love. To do so, he explores and exploits the work's textuality, constructedness, and arbitrariness.

IV: Instead of fifty brides and grooms, we now have three men and three women, whom we are invited to see as rhetorical surfaces rather than real figures in whose suffering we are invited to take interest (Fuchs 105). What they say does not give the impression that it comes from within; how they say it does not tempt us to start peeling off the layers to discover the underlying psychological motivating force that explains everything they do (in Erin Mee 89). It is obvious that Mee wants to remove our focus of attention from the character as an irreducible essence, to the inadequacy of the concept of character, to a recognition of subjectivity as the product of a relational system which is finally that of discourse itself.

It is midsummer evening, at "the long golden twilight" (*Big Love* 224). The sweet and earnest Lydia unceremoniously enters in a crumpled white wedding dress, looking somewhat disoriented (223); she strips and plunges into a bathtub.[8] Then, accompanied by wedding processional music (Mozart), her two sisters follow wearing bridal dresses as well and dragging an impressive eight-piece matching set of luggage. The perky and materialistic Olympia, who carries along with her the broken heel of her shoe, her Oil of Olay Moisturizing Wash, her John Frieda Sheer Blonde Shampoo, her Estée Lauder and Uplift Eyecream, and hopes for a wedding dress from Monique Lhuillier but all she can find is an Alvina Valenta not even a Vera Wang (276), and last but not least the feminist Thyona, who always strikes back whenever she is threatened.

They have escaped Greece and are now in Italy where they seek refuge at a luxurious villa facing the Mediterranean Sea owned by Piero. Upon their arrival they run into

[8] In Aeschylus we read that the maidens also enter "Unheralded, unsponsored, without friend or guide" (l. 240).

"an agreeable, weak and useless" (223) transvestite, Giuliano,[9] who has a collection of Barbies and Kens and to whom Lydia confesses that they are looking for asylum so that they won't have to marry their cousins.

Giuliano: You want to be taken in as immigrants?

Lydia: As refugees.

Giuliano: Refugees.

Lydia: Yes.

Giuliano: From...

Lydia: From Greece.

Giuliano: I mean, from, you know:

political oppression, or war...

Lydia: Or kidnapping. Or rape.

Giuliano: From rape.

Lydia: By our cousins.

Giuliano: Well, marriage really.

Lydia: Not if we can help it. (226-27)

Mee does not explain on what basis their claim is based —nor indeed all the circumstances which led up to the flight and the pursuit. We are simply told that their father signed a wedding contract with their Greek cousins who

went from Greece to America,

and now they're rich

and they think they can come back

[9] In the original story, the first person they encounter is the King himself, who greets them as strangers, due to their "barbaric gowns [...] How can/ A race like yours be Argive? You resemble rather/ Lidyans—certainly not women of our country" (l. 237, 275-77).

and take whatever they want. (234)

By maintaining the rather deliberate obscurity of Aeschylus on the matter, Mee helps us concentrate on the violence of the pursuit itself and the loathing which it engenders. The violence of the pursuers puts them in the wrong; they are guilty of *hubris*, and their victims deserve the pity of the locals. Yet Piero, like his prototype Pelasgus, hesitates to help. He claims that he is not the "Red Cross" and that he can't take in every refugee who comes into his garden and turn his home into a "camp [...] full of Kosovars and Ibo and Tootsies/ boat people from China and godknows whatall" (2000: 235). And what will happen, he wonders, if the grooms come back and accuse him of abducting their women and threaten to shoot him if he does not give them back? (236)

Lydia may consider all these a matter of right and wrong, of justice, but not rational Piero, who looks at the world as a very complicated powerhouse that crushes the weak (236). He does not have the slightest doubt that, no matter what they really want to do, in the end they will marry their cousins. Their course of action is already carved out, mediated within the present power structure that leaves them with no choice since no one would dare protect them, for no one is willing to put his home and family at risk (272).

Mee deliberately turns his heroines' bodies into a site of conflicting languages of power. He adopts the victim's position and shows that the will to exercise power jeopardizes humanitarian egalitarianism. Constantine, one of the grooms, is a case in point when he warns that he will have his bride if he has to have her arms tied behind her back and dragged to him. After all

[...] People are taken against their will every day.

[...] Tomorrow will take today by force

whether you like it or not.

Time itself is an act of rape.

Life is rape. (243)

And when Olympia reminds him that they have an uncle in Italy that will take care of him, or that what he is claiming is no different than it would be if they were lying

in their beds and soldiers came through the door and took whoever it was they wanted (273),[10] he is quick to answer back that he is an American citizen now, that he is not afraid of her uncle and advises her to watch television to see "what happens when Americans want something" (243).

Constantine never questions the moral dimensions of his views. He feels excused by the discourse that has been made around his actions, demonstrating the Foucauldian episteme of our age. He is another typical Mee character "through whom the culture speaks, often without knowing it" (2004: 2). By interconnecting discourse and power Constantine makes, rather than persuades (*petho*),[11] Olympia see that refusal to submit (like refusal to court in the proper manner) implies an active desire for conflict—an idea we first encounter in the original text where, as Zeitlin observes, "whether verbal, political, or sexual, warfare is always the medium" (1996: 139). Force is the only guise under which marriage presents itself to the modern Danaids, as an act comparable to the preying of bird on bird, an occasion for fear and resistance.

Constantine's abusive discourse of violence provokes the angry response of Thyona, who, speaking from the victim's position, analyses power from bottom up and not simply as an imposition of the interests of the class above. Addressing her sisters, she asks:

What choice do you have
if your father won't protect you

[10] The image of the woman as property, as a subjected subject, is stressed in all of Mee's adaptations of classical myths.

[11] *Petho-Persuasion*, the mediator between two opposing groups or points of view that implies an effort made by one to identify with the other. It admits the dynamic principle of compromise that accepts dialogue between two sides. An aspect absent from Mee's play, yet very important in Aeschylus where the city of Athens rests on the dialogue between fixed values and the dynamic power of persuasion and mediation. At the same time, however, the suppliant women personify something else: they are mediators between two cultures. Their role as suppliants, like the herald, is a way to import or adopt alien others into one's own society. The question in Aeschylus's play is how will the city "socialize" its virgin suppliants and persuade them to marry? Marriage is designed to tame and civilize the female partner. It is the last stage for an *astoxenos* (resident alien), to become a *metoikos*, and finally a citizen-wife of the Thesmophoreia (Zeitlin 135-36).

the law will not protect you
you flee to another country
and some man will not protect you
what is left?

Thyona feels that the men's discourse helps create the subordinate identities of those who are excluded from participating in it. And so, to the question "what is left?", she answers,

Nothing except to protect yourself
We have no country.
We have become our own country now
where we make the laws ourselves
[...] these men who left us no choice
these men who force themselves on us
we will kill them
one by one
[...] Not one groom will live through his wedding night,
not one.
Are we agreed? (273-4)

Her language suggests a horror of male contact in any form. The violent approach of the grooms has turned her against marriage as such and men in particular. For her

The male is a biological accident
an incomplete female
the product of a damaged gene

a half-dead lump of flesh
trapped in a twilight zone somewhere between apes and humans
always looking obsessively for some woman. (239)

Thyona's radical reaction is very revealing regarding body politics, politics of difference and the power game they involve. She embraces a deconstructive, separatist attitude which shows that, however regrettably, violence can only breed violence, that the victims of violence can become violent agents and that hubris can breed hubris—an idea first encountered in *The Suppliants*, where, for all their claims of *sophrosene*, the Danaids show a capacity for violence. "MEN," Mee's Thyona cries,

You think you can do whatever you want with me, think again.

you think that I'm so delicate?

you think you have to care for me?

[...] you think I need a man to save my life?

[...] These men can fuck themselves

These men are leeches

these men are parasites

these rapists

these politicians

these Breadwinners. (244-45)

"Boy babies should be flushed down the toilet at birth" (2000: 239),^[12] she angrily says, to which Lydia answers back:

There are places in the world
where refugees are taken in
out of generosity
and often these are men who do the taking in
because people have the capacity for goodness
and there could be a world where people care for one another where men are good
to women
and there is not a men's history
and a separate women's history but a human history. (239-40)

The dramatic situation that Mee creates is choreographed like the World Wrestling Federation; it is "spoken" physically, through gesture and body movement. As Erin Mee explains, "[her] father writes text for performance in which what he has written will be a fraction of the total experience. He sets up a situation that requires the director, in turn, to elaborate on what he has written" (2002: 85). In *Big Love* the brides slam to the wrestling mat, writhing and tumbling in hysterical and hilarious fashion, as they try to vent their rage and frustration. It is the kind of choreography that indirectly brings to mind the story of the brides' ancestress Io who, stung into maddened flight by a gadfly (*oistros*) and compelled to wander like a maenad over a vast geographical expanse, captures the strange contradictions of the critical moment when the maiden, like the young animal, is yet untamed (Zeitlin 154).

[12] One finds similar thoughts in *Requiem for the Dead* ("O mortal and miserable race of men walking about as a superfluous burden upon the earth") and *The Trojan Women* ("Men should be extinguished [...] crushed and stepped on, utterly extinguished"). Mee's heroines appear as a collective at odds with those in power.

The grooms, on the other hand, stomp, jump and berate women for their expectations of men until they are exhausted. Both sides claim their territory and make their physical presence felt in a way that is as grotesque as it is bloody, sentimental as it is very physical and cruel, a maddening interplay that invites us to read one text through another, "however fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic their relationship may be" (Owens 73), to see all the larger forces of history, politics, economics, all constituents of culture, that condition people's lives and their behavior. Constantine foregrounds this idea of the construction of the subject-self as fiction when he describes gender role playing in these words:

Girls are socialized
so they want a man to be older
take charge
[...] a boy wants a girl
she plays hard to get
a boy learns to
talk big
[...] not take the answer no
look for younger women
[...] People think
it's hard to be a woman;
but it's not easy
to be a man,
the expectations people have
that a man should be a civilized person [...] (264, 265, 266)

Mee brings to us male and female selfhoods with their cultural, ethnic and gendered characteristics that predetermine their subject positions within discourse.

Culture always turns out to be much bigger than them. Lydia is the only one who is ready to try and overcome embodied differences and thus liberate herself from this rather pessimistic preconditioning in order to achieve better human relations. Like Emily in Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, she reconsiders the value of life and concludes that the most important thing is to "get along with each other [...] to know what it is/to live life on earth" and that "true love has no conditions" (261). Thus, when her sisters pull out kitchen knives and murder their husbands, one by one, all of them splashing their white wedding dress with blood, she and Nikos are off to one side making love. For the first time sexual desire presents itself not as a brutal rape, but as a persuasive and enchanting courtship. In her mind love outweighs all, it is the highest law, but not for Thyona of course, who continues to disagree, not because she is incapable of loving but because she feels that:

You can't love a person in this world
when everyone else might be hurt, or worse
choose your selfish choice
and let everyone else go to hell.
[...] in the real world
if there is no justice
there can be no love
because there can be no love
that is not freely offered
and it cannot be free
unless every person has equal standing
and so

the first order of business is to make a just society. (281, 282-83)

Where Thyona cannot live in a world with no justice, Lydia cannot imagine herself living in a world "where it is not possible to love another person" (282). Approaching the end, "the close-knit family bond displayed at the opening of the play is ultimately torn by strife and difference" (Hopkins and Orr 18). Lydia distances herself from the oppositional character of her sisters' thought and opts for a more unifying framework of belief. In Aeschylus we do not know how Hypermestra was treated for her disobedience. Was she brought to trial? And if yes, by whom? Danaus? The polis?[13] In Mee's play we are told that Lydia is put on trial and Bella, the matriarch (Piero's mother), is assigned to deliver the verdict. She says:

[...] You did a dreadful thing, you women, when you killed these men

[...]And yet [...] what else could you have done?

You came to us [...]

and we failed you.

We share the blame with you.

[....] And yet,

you can't condemn your sister

[....]

She chose love

[...]

For we all live together

[13] On the grounds of the few lines we have from the missing Aeschylean *Danaïdes*, where Aphrodite appears and delivers a speech which proclaims the universal power of sexual love, we could assume that she spoke in Hypermestra's defence and that Hypermestra was on trial. What is left in the air is the fate of the other women. We have no exodos of the Chorus—it prays to Zeus asking him to save them "from cruel subjection to a man [they] hate" and "grant victory to the woman's cause" (l. 1064-1067) — yet we can assume that in the end we have reconciliation, their reconciliation to marriage. It was the function of Aphrodite to reconcile them, as it was the function of Athena to reconcile the Furies. And the lines that we have are part of her attempt to persuade them. If this view is correct, the trilogy ends as it began with the attitude of the Danaïdes to marriage, but this time with a conversion

and come to embrace
the splendid variety of life on earth
[...]
take it for what it is: the glory of life
[...]
For the sake of healing
for the sake of life itself
for life to go on
there will be no justice. (285-86)

In their analysis of the play, Hopkins and Orr choose to underline the political overtones of Mee's ending by claiming that Bella's "ruling makes clear the inadequacy of any mere court decision in the face of destruction and loss of life, as well as the difficulty of resolving a scenario which, in different forms, continues to play out in Europe and the Middle East [...] What is, for a comfortable Western reader or theatregoer, a set of contemporary reference points applied to the appropriation of a classic text is for others a vivid and deadly-serious reflection of their own lives. Though it begins as a playfully postmodern wedding-gone-horribly-wrong, *Big Love* becomes the arena for a debate over real-world questions: Is the absence of justice the same as injustice? Must we choose between a justice that perpetuates division, hate, and war and an injustice that leads to peace and reconciliation?" (18). Hopkins and Orr are right in posing all these rhetorical questions. Mee's colorful, wild spectacle in the end, designed to provide the appropriate context for the exit of Lydia and Nikos, does not submit to the seductions of the imagery of the resolution of conflicts, of completed patterns. The dialogue is kept open and invites the audience to ask whether history is evidence of who and how we are and what we do in an age that instead of remembering loves *lethe*, or judge whether Lydia is guilty, whether eros and understanding are still possible,

what authority is, that of man over woman, of husband over wife, of Chief of State over citizens, of the city over stranger? Love or death, or love and death? Whose power is inscribed on whose body? The final text is constructed by the viewer and the free play of imagination. Meaning or lack of it become the property of the interpreter, the one to answer the question whether people can still love each other, live together and prosper.

V: In *Big Love* Mee comes to repeat what he says in one of his earlier plays, *Orestes*: to put a nice face on things does not make them into good things, to speak nicely does not imply a nice person (*Orestes* 48). One has to make use of his/her heart. "Of all human qualities, the greatest is sympathy," he writes in *Big Love* (*Big Love* 287). To be a human being one has to relate with others no matter what their faults are. And if, in the end, the wedding has any meaning at all, it lies in its symbolic connotations: a stage icon of people's innermost urge to celebrate in an old fashioned ceremony in a church they probably no longer believe in what they feel deep inside. As Bella says, "If we cannot embrace another/ what hope do we have of life?/ What hope is there to survive at all?" (2000: 286). After all, "We've done a lot of violence to the snivelling tendencies in our natures," Mee writes in his *Orestes*; "What we need now are some strong, straightforward actions that you'd have to be a fool not to learn the wrong lessons from it [...]. Everyman must shout: there's a great destructive work to be done. We're doing it!" (*Orestes* 79).

Big Love is a play written by a playwright who believes that, although we are made up of heterogeneous codes, we can still strive for an autonomy of a classically liberal kind that would help downplay the seemingly irreconcilable differences of identity between individuals (and nations) and help build a sense of (universal) community. As mentioned earlier, Mee did not turn to the Greeks by accident. He felt that they "had a larger understanding of what makes human beings human, and so their plays

prepare their people to live their lives, to be conscious beings, clearheaded, able to understand what it is to have life on earth." This insight is what really tempted Mee to use them as a model for his own work (in Volansky 26). The words of Hesiod in his *Agamemnon* I think provide an appropriate finale to this paper:

Nothing human is forever,
everything perishes;
except the human heart
that has the capacity to remember
and the capacity to say
never again
or
forever.

And so it is
that our own hearts
and nothing else
are the final arbiters
of what it is
to be human.

WORKS CITED

- Aeschylus. *The Suppliants*. Trans. Philip Vellacott. London: Penguin Books, 1961.
- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. S. H. Butcher. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Writing and Difference*. Trans. A. Bass. London: Routledge, 1978.
- Fuchs, Elinor. *The Death of Character*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1996.
- Hopkins, D. J. and Shelley Orr. "It's a Nightmare Really: The Radical Appropriations of Charles L. Mee." *Theatreforum* 18 (2001): 12-9.
- Green, Amy S. *The Revisionist Stage: American Directors Reinvent the Classics*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1994.
- Innes, Christopher. "Introduction: Remaking Modern Classics." *Modern Drama* 43. 2 (2000): 248-351.
- Kitto, H. D. F. *Greek Tragedy*. New York: Doubleday, 1954.
- Lahr, John. "Inventing the Enemy." Review of *The Persians*. Dir. by Peter Sellars. *New Yorker*, October 18 (1993): 103-6.
- Mee, Charles. *Orestes*. In: *Performing Arts Journal* 45 (1993): 29-79.
- . *A Nearly Normal Life: A Memoir*. New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1999.
- . *Big Love*. In: *Humana Festival*. Eds. Michael Bigelow Dixon and Amy Wagener. New Hampshire: A Smith and Kraus Book, 2000. 219-90.
- . Interview. *Wilmabill* (February /March 2003): 2-3.
- . Interview. *Wilmabill* (March/April 2004): 1-3.
- Mee, Erin. "Mee on Mee: Shattered and Fucked Up and Full of Wreckage." *The Drama Review* 46 . 3 (2002): 83-104.
- Owens, Craig. "The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism." *October* 13 (1980): 67-86.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.
- Vernant, J. P., and P. Vidal-Naquet. *Tragedy and Myth in Ancient Greece*. Trans. J. Lloyd. Atlantic Highlands, N.J. 1981.
- Volansky, Michele. "Forces of History." Interview With Charles Mee. *Theatreforum* 14 (1999): 25-6.
- White, Hayden. *The Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978.
- Wilder, Matthew. "Fantasizing About Chuck Mee." *Theatreforum* 5 (1994): 41-3.

Winnington-Ingram, R. P. *Studies in Aeschylus*. London: Cambridge UP, 1983.

Wren, Celia. "Combines in Red." *American Theatre* (September 2001): 58.

Zeitlin, Froma. *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1996.

[1]* I would like to thank my colleague Ruth Parkin Gounelsa for reading the paper and making useful suggestions.

See H. Cixous' and Ola Rotimi's use of the Oedipus story, Kamau Brathwaite's *Ghanan*, Mac Wellman's *American* and Athol Fugard's *South African Antigones*, Wole Soyinka's Nigerian *Bacchae*, Guy Butler's *South African*, Christa Wolf's *German* and Oscar van Woensel's *Dutch Medeas*, M. Yurcenar's French *Clytemnestra*, among others.
