

# **Disarming the canon: exploring Tepper's rewriting of Euripides**

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## **Abstract**

The relevance of the classical canon has been the subject of much heated debate, especially in a contemporary post-colonial and ostensibly post-patriarchal context. The adaptation of classical works is one way in which authors and academics have sought to problematise the perceived value of this canon, and the influence it has on contemporary attitudes. Yet the study and discussion of these contemporary adaptations has often largely ignored work by authors in liminal genres such as science fiction. This reveals yet another way in which canons may be problematised -- another centre which cannot hold. This article explores the mechanisms of adaptation used by such a liminal author, Sheri S. Tepper, in her science fiction novel *The gate to Women's Country* (1988), which writes back to the past by adapting three plays by Euripides – *Iphigenia at Aulis* (410BC), *Iphigenia in Tauris* (412BC), and *The Trojan women* (415BC). I argue that, by writing in the genre of science fiction, Tepper is uniquely situated to destabilise contemporary patriarchal worldviews rooted in a classical past and perpetuated by a classical canon. This article demonstrates the value of the critically neglected genre of science fiction in reframing the old order to posit a new one.

## Opsomming

Die tersaaklikheid van die klassieke kanon is al hewig gedebatteer, veral in 'n hedendaagse postkoloniale en oënskynlik postpatriargale konteks. Die verwerking van klassieke werke is een van die maniere waarop outeurs en akademici probeer om die geagte waarde van die kanon en die invloed daarvan op hedendaagse houdings te problematiseer. Tog word die studie en bespreking van hedendaagse aanpassings in liminale genres soos wetenskapsfiksie grootliks geïgnoreer. Dit onthul nog 'n manier om kanons te problematiseer – nog 'n middelpunt wat nie kan hou nie. Dié artikel verken die meganismes wat die liminale outeur Sheri S Tepper in haar wetenskapsfiksieroman *The Gate to Women's Country* (1988) gebruik. Dit wys heen na die verlede deur drie van Euripides se toneelstukke te verwerk – *Iphigenia in Aulis* (410 VC), *Iphigenia in Tauris* (412 VC), en *Die vroue van Troje* (415 VC). Ek redeneer dat deur die genre wetenskapsfiksie te gebruik, Tepper in die unieke posisie is om die kontemporêre patriargale wêreldbeskouings te destabiliseer wat in 'n klassieke verlede gewortel is en deur 'n klassieke kanon voortgesit word. Hierdie artikel toon die waarde van die krities verwaarloosde genre van wetenskapsfiksie in die herformulering van die ou orde om 'n nuwe een te poneer.

In many ways the literature of ancient Greece has never really left western cultural consciousness. One need not look far for examples of the sustained social interest in this literature; classical Greek myths can be seen at the heart of works by canonical Modernist writers like Eliot<sup>1</sup>, Yeats<sup>2</sup>, and Joyce<sup>3</sup>. More recent examples of critical literary engagement with ancient Greek texts can be found in the form of Margaret Atwood's (2006) *The Penelopiad*, which adapts Homer's ([800BC] 1937) *Odyssey*, and Jeanette Winterson's (2006) *Weight*, which adapts the myth of Atlas and Heracles, and about which Winterson states "in the retelling comes a new emphasis or bias" (2006: xviii). Kamila Shamsie's (2017) *Home fire*, a modern retelling of Sophocles's ([441BC] 2003) tragedy *Antigone*, has also recently been longlisted for the 2017 Man Booker prize, and the film *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2017), drawing on a series of comics based on the Amazons of ancient Greece, drew critical acclaim when it was released this year. Another contemporary example of this enduring interest in Greek mythology is Colm Tóibín's 2017 novel *House of names*, a retelling of the *Oresteia* (Aeschylus [458BC] 2003) from the perspective of Clytemnestra, Iphigenia's mother. Colm Tóibín's novel is particularly interesting as an illustration of the impulse to problematize aspects of classical source material through adaptation. Alex Preston (2017) writes that "*House of names* gives us so much that isn't in the original trilogy ... This is a novel that is a celebration of what novels can do", and Mary Beard's (2017) review in *The New York Times* states that Colm Tóibín's novel makes the original myth "strike a new chord, far more impressive than the pious respect or worthy aura of "classicism" that often surrounds it".

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot's ([1939] 1964) play *The family reunion* includes an ancient Greek chorus and the Eumenides from the *Oresteia* (Aeschylus [458BC] 2003).

<sup>2</sup> W.B. Yeats' ([1928] 2017) *The tower* contains multiple poems with clear connections to Greek mythology, such as "Leda and the Swan" and "A Man Young And Old: XI. From Oedipus At Colonus".

<sup>3</sup> James Joyce's ([1922] 2016) *Ulysses* is a lauded reimagining of Homer's *Odyssey* ([800BC] 1937).

However, the adaptation and interpretation of ancient Greek stories is not reserved solely for acclaimed authors such as Tóibín or Man Booker nominees. Hardwick and Harrison (2013: xx) note that there has been a “contemporary increase in multifaceted public interest in Greek and Roman material, often mediated in the public imagination through popularising cultural forms”. They also identify diverse impulses behind this contemporary interest in classical material; while this material may indeed be merely recreated for contemporary audiences, it is also often used as a “catalyst for debate ... in the economic and political contexts of its generation and consumption and in its problematic relationship with antiquity”. A quick internet search reveals multiple lists of films, television series, and books based on Greco-Roman mythology. These adaptations vary from American blockbuster films like *Troy* (Peterson 2004), which stars multiple A-list celebrities such as Brad Pitt and provides a fairly compressed version of the events of the Trojan War, to a list on Goodreads<sup>4</sup> (2009) called simply *Modern adaptations of Greek mythology*, which contains, at the time of writing, 283 individual books that can be considered as direct adaptations of Greek mythology (i.e. are not merely influenced by classical material, but clearly adapt particular myths).

The proliferation of lists like these, which are communally-generated and document modern adaptations of ancient Greek mythology in multiple forms and genres, demonstrates two things. Firstly, it shows that the adaptation of ancient Greek or Latin texts is an ongoing project that is not restricted to a single form, genre, language, or culture. Secondly, the lists show that these adaptations do not come into existence and are not received only in restricted or sequestered spaces. While I have indeed provided a (brief) selection of adaptations of ancient Greek literature written by “serious” authors, my decision to search for the abovementioned lists through a widely-accessible search engine such as Google is a

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<sup>4</sup> A social media site that allows users to find, review, track their reading of, and recommend books.

calculated one; it demonstrates that these adaptations are not being created, received, or catalogued solely by specialist academics, but are rather indicative of a far more widespread interest in ancient Greek mythology, fostered by a community of creators and receivers that is not limited by genre, geography, or education. These adaptations are persistent features of popular modern culture; they are owned by a wide and varied collection of both creators and audiences that sustain the existence of these classical ghosts.

Traditional Western classical studies, according to Blondell et al. (2002: ix), might suggest that this sustained social interest in classical Greek texts is rooted in their universality – that Athenian tragedies contain “basic, eternal truths about human nature ... truths which—thanks to the artistic genius of individual playwrights—[transcend] social and cultural differences”. Hardwick and Stray (2011: 4) highlight a similar attitude in the concept of “the classical tradition”, which they describe as a process by which the fixed “meaning” of classical texts (and the associated moral and political values) is transmitted across centuries to finally be “grasped and passed on” by a sufficiently educated reader. However, this attitude has been subjected to increasingly rigorous questioning as the relevance of the classical canon has become the subject of much heated debate, especially in a contemporary post-colonial and ostensibly post-patriarchal context. As Hardwick and Harrison (2013: xxi) state, “assumptions about the inherent superiority of ancient works now tend to be more closely questioned, both in scholarship and in the wider public sphere ... there has been renewed acceptance of the independent status and value of new works”. The adaptation of classical works is one way in which authors and academics have sought to question the perceived superiority of this canon, and the influence it has on contemporary attitudes. Linda Hutcheon (2013: 7) writes in *A theory of adaptation* that “adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication. And there are manifestly many different intentions behind the act of adaptation:

the urge to consume and erase the memory of the adapted text or to call it into question is as likely as the desire to pay tribute by copying”.

This questioning engagement with the literary canon is also supported by Bakhtin (1981), who compares the developing genre of the novel to the established genre of the epic to establish the distinctiveness of the novelistic genre. While Bakhtin (1981) focuses on epic poetry as an example of the kind of fixed genre from which the novel differs, both Holquist (1981) and Bakhtin (1981) state that the insights that emerge from this comparison can be conflated to include “myth and all other traditional forms of narrative” (Holquist 1981: xxxii) because “we encounter the epic as a genre that has not only long since completed its development, but one that is already antiquated. With certain reservations we can say the same for the other major genres, even for tragedy” (Bakhtin 1981: 3). Bakhtin (1981: 18) suggests that the “high genres of classical antiquity” are intrinsically linked to the “unified fabric of the heroic past and tradition”; they can be considered to represent a completed circle with no space for contemporary interaction. Bakhtin (1981: 16) posits that the genres of the epic past are beyond the reach of contemporary readers; “walled off from all subsequent times by an impenetrable boundary”. He writes that epic discourse “is given solely as tradition, sacred and sacrosanct, evaluated in the same way by all and demanding a pious attitude toward itself” (Bakhtin 1981: 16). However, the novel, Bakhtin suggests, is the antidote to this piety. The novel removes the boundary created by distance and brings the subject to “the level of contemporary reality, in a zone of direct and even crude contact” (Bakhtin 1981: 22-23).

And this means that the canonized texts of the major antiquated genres with which the novel engages – and one example of this engagement is adaptation – are altered:

They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the “novelistic” layers of literary

language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, elements of self-parody and finally – this is the most important thing – the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (Bakhtin 1981: 7)

This study springs from Hutcheon's (2013) suggestion that adaptation is a meaningful and intentional process, and that it might be more useful to consider adaptations as considered engagements with preceding texts rather than merely as mediocre versions of preceding texts. It also draws on Bakhtin's (1981) suggestion that a novelistic engagement with classical texts and genres might create new ways in which to frame these classical and canonical texts, to suggest that perhaps reframing the classical canon might be more productive than erasing it. Finally, it draws on classical reception theory, and more specifically the work of scholars including Batstone (2006: 17) and Hardwick (2003: 8), to explore Tepper's reworking of ancient texts in a way that uses the vast distance in context and culture between classical and contemporary texts to provide a mechanism for readers to move beyond the borders of their own context and enable them to critically evaluate that context. Similarly to Suvin's (1979: 7-8) theory of "cognitive estrangement" in science fiction, this idea in classical reception theory suggests that reframing the classical canon through reception and adaptation might be an effective way for readers to explore ideas relevant to their context through the shielding distance of the ancient past.

This paper seeks to explore and analyse the mechanisms of adaptation used by Sheri S. Tepper in her science-fiction novel *The gate to Women's Country* (1988). Tepper is an American writer and a fierce advocate for women's rights and reproductive freedom. She is an outspoken feminist, and more specifically an ecofeminist, and these concerns emerge strongly in many of her novels. Tepper (1988) wrote *The gate to Women's Country* in the context of second-wave feminism, which was increasingly theoretical and associated the

subjugation of women with broader critiques of the grand narratives of capitalism, patriarchy, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother (Nicholson 1997: 2-3; Rampton 2008: 8; Whelehan 1996: 3-5). While second-wave feminism has subsequently been criticised for essentialism and for focusing too strongly on middle-class white women (Moore 2007: 126; Sturgeon 1997: 5-8), the work of writers like Tepper has had an enduring effect on conceptions of sex and gender.

The structure of society in *The gate to Women's Country* (Tepper 1988) seems to reflect a stance attuned to the thinking of second-wave theorists who posited a strong difference between masculinity and femininity (Nicholson 1997: 3-4) – women and men are presented as inherently different and society is constructed in a manner that takes this into account by segregating the sexes completely and assigning firm roles to each. It seems implied that the different sexes are intrinsically suited to different roles, and as the narrative progresses it is revealed that one of the innate qualities of men is violence – the reader learns that men caused the “Convulsions” that destroyed society because of their warring natures, and later in the novel, violent and domineering men threaten to destroy Women's Country, too.

It thus seems probable that by writing science-fiction, Tepper hoped to be able to use diverse strategies of adaptation to question contemporary patriarchal worldviews rooted in a classical past and perpetuated by the cultural capital of a classical canon. *The gate to Women's Country* (Tepper 1988) writes back to the past by adapting three plays by Euripides – *Iphigenia at Aulis* ([410BC] 1999), *Iphigenia in Tauris* ([412BC] 1959), and *The Trojan women* ([415BC] 1959).

The classical texts by Euripides possess the immense cultural weight of being considered both part of the Western literary canon and, perhaps due to their inclusion in this



canon, being considered original or source texts. As Françoise Meltzer (1994) suggests, originality is a quality that canonicity, and possibly thus society in general, positions as virtuous. Ironically, however, such perceptions have sometimes resulted in the classical texts' problematic and unequal representations of gender being both widely disseminated and imbued with the weight of cultural authority – they serve to transmit and perpetuate patriarchal ideologies because they possess the cultural capital with which to do so. Mukherjee (2014:29), informed by Bourdieu (1984: 243), defines this cultural capital as “the internalization of the cultural code or the acquisition of a knowledge that equips the subject to decipher cultural relations”. This suggests that texts possess cultural capital by representing aspirational cultural and educational standards and that the reading of canonical texts might be used as a way to demonstrate or improve the class position of the reader.

In contrast, Tepper's text is devalued in several ways; she is a female author, working in the liminal genre of the fantastical, and she uses strategies of adaptation to engage with the classical texts -- thus undermining the originality so valued by the canon. As will be shown in the remainder of this article, Tepper problematizes the texts by Euripides through the content of her novel, but also through her choice of genre, her method of engagement, and even her gender.

The three plays by Euripides adapted in *The gate to Women's Country* (Tepper 1988) all centre on the Trojan War. The first play, *Iphigenia at Aulis* (Euripides [410BC] 1999), focuses on Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek coalition during the Trojan War, and his decision to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, to Artemis in order to appease the gods and ensure that his troops will be allowed to sail to Troy to begin the war. Agamemnon is torn between his love for his daughter and his desire to avenge his brother's honour (as his brother's wife, Helen, has eloped with the Trojan prince Paris) but eventually Iphigenia herself convinces her father to sacrifice her for the sake of her people's honour.

The second play, *Iphigenia in Tauris* (Euripides [412BC] 1959), is set after the Trojan War. When Agamemnon finally decides to go through with the sacrifice of his daughter, Artemis intercedes at the last moment and replaces Iphigenia with a deer. Artemis then makes Iphigenia a priestess at her temple in Taurus, which involves performing ritual human sacrifices. Iphigenia's brother, Orestes, lands on the island and is brought to her to be sacrificed, but eventually the two recognize each other and Orestes helps Iphigenia to escape Tauris and return home.

The third play, *The Trojan women* (Euripides [415BC] 1959), is set at the end of the Trojan War, in the open space before the ransacked city of Troy. The men of Troy have either fled or been killed, and the women and children left behind are captives of the conquering army. They sit before the ruins of Troy and wait to be apportioned as slaves to the Greek soldiers.

Significantly, the women in Tepper's *The gate to Women's Country* (1988) have far more autonomy and power than those presented in Euripides's three texts. The structure of society in *Women's Country* is matriarchal; women run every aspect of society and men and women live in completely separate areas. While the women perform all the duties necessary to run a town, the men spend all their time training for war in their separate garrisons. The narration is interspersed with brief scenes from the fictional play "*Iphigenia at Ilium*", which is performed once a year in every town in *Women's Country* and which all female children are expected to memorise from a young age. This play within the text draws freely on the three Euripides texts previously discussed, and runs through the novel as a *leitmotif* that underpins the novel's commentary on gender.

Suvin (1979: 7-8) writes that science fiction is "a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and

whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment". Furthermore Mukherjee (2014: 13) suggests that the classical canon can be considered "not just an archive but transmission, perpetuating a critical tradition and open to interventions that dislodge familiar reading formations". Thus a science-fiction adaptation of a classical canonical text might in fact be more effective in challenging the classical instruments of transmission by using strategies of cognitive estrangement that enable the reader to explore potentially problematic aspects of the source text through the safe distance created by both a fantastical setting and elements that write back to antiquity.

The first strategy that Tepper uses is that of not only adapting but also, through this adaptation, continuing and reframing Iphigenia's historically-contentious story. The extant adaptations of the Iphigenia myth, for example, do not all agree on what happens to her during her sacrifice. One version frames Iphigenia as unwilling to be sacrificed; in fact, she is bound and gagged to prevent her from subverting the sacrifice with the ill omen of her struggles and cries (Aeschylus [458BC] 2003). In another adaptation, Iphigenia goes willingly to her own sacrifice, even convincing her father that her sacrifice must occur (Euripides [410BC] 1999). One form of the myth has Iphigenia killed during the sacrifice (Aeschylus [458BC] 2003); another has Artemis rescue Iphigenia at the last minute and replace the virgin princess with a deer (Euripides [410BC] 1999; Euripides [412BC] 1959). This means that Euripides does not simply reproduce a unified Iphigenia myth, but rather that he makes conscious decisions about how to present Iphigenia in his work – and his choices are telling. Iphigenia herself is often constructed to suit the needs of the author of a particular adaptation; Aeschylus ([458BC] 2003) seems to present Iphigenia as a passive character subordinated to the decisions of others, while Euripides situates Iphigenia as a more complex and independent figure who takes an active role in her own story, first resisting and later consenting to her own sacrifice. In fact, Euripides's complex antagonist seems to

problematize aspects of the preceding versions of the Iphigenia myth; where previously Iphigenia's myth was a minor incident in the larger story of the Trojan War, Euripides places her as a central character in two tragedies, and he subverts previous passive versions of the character by granting Iphigenia some autonomy in the matter of her own death. He has Iphigenia go willingly to her sacrifice; she says that "death has been decreed—for me and by me. I want to carry out this same act/in a glorious way, casting all lowborn behaviour aside" and later that "it's more important for one single man/to look upon the light than a thousand women" (Euripides [410BC] 1999: 380-381). These statements reframe Iphigenia; far from a mere bound and gagged body to be sacrificed, she becomes instead a contextually unusually informed heroine figure with a clear understanding of the social and political implications of her sacrifice (or refusal thereof) and a sense of duty to her family and her people so strong that it eventually overcomes her fear of death. Euripides writes Iphigenia as a young woman on the brink of adult life, who is forced by unavoidable circumstance to make a difficult decision between her own desire to live, and her duty to her male relatives and people as a whole to be sacrificed so they may have wind to sail to Troy. Ultimately, Iphigenia's sense of duty is rewarded; Euripides's ([412BC] 1959) *Iphigenia in Tauris*, which follows her story as a priestess in a foreign land after her last-minute rescue by Artemis, is a clear indication that Euripides writes a version of the myth which spares Iphigenia's life and provides her many characteristics more often found in heroic male characters of the era. Rabinowitz (1993: 14), however, writes that "Euripides may indeed 'invent women' and 'reverse traditional representations', but ultimately he recuperates the female figures for patriarchy ... to recognise this function is not to deny that he endows his female characters with great understanding and allows them to give voice to important ideas; nonetheless, their experience is shaped to the end of supporting male power".

Tepper's (1988) "*Iphigenia at Ilium*" clearly evokes both *Iphigenia at Aulis* (Euripides [410BC] 1999) and *Iphigenia in Tauris* (Euripides [412BC] 1959) through a device of syntactic patterning that implies Tepper's contribution to what could be considered an Iphigenia trilogy. As Hutcheon (2013: 8) writes, adaptation is not only "a transposition of a recognizable other work or works", but also "an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work[s]". However, unlike Euripides's dutiful Iphigenia, Tepper's Iphigenia speaks not as a living priestess of Artemis, rewarded for her selfless devotion to duty in Aulis by being allowed to live after all, but as a vengeful ghost. It is clear that in the world of *The gate to Women's Country* (Tepper 1988), Iphigenia's last-minute rescue and subsequent life as a priestess in Tauris is considered fictional, a strategic construction by classical writers.

Iphigenia's ghost says:

What people know is what they want to know.  
That was a late-come hind, great warrior,  
For I was there and never saw it come!  
Artemis sent no hind. Artemis had  
more urgent business in some other place.  
It was my blood spurting upon the stones  
each time my heart's fist clenched, it was my brain  
afire with pain, my voice gone dumb, my eyes  
turned into dimming orbs of sand-worn glass,  
their youthful lustre lost forevermore.  
Iphigenia, Agamemnon's child,  
died on that bloody stone, not some poor hind.  
...  
And though by now all poets gloss it o'er  
to make it seem a different, kinder thing,  
there was no great Achilles at my side,  
no goddess-given hind to take my place.  
I made no offer of myself as sacrifice,  
though all the songs in Hellas say I did. (Tepper 1988: 64-65)

Tepper's version, though it uses similarly formal structure and diction to that of Euripides, refuses to sanitize or glorify Iphigenia's death. The brutality of a young woman killed by her own father's hand is intensified by Tepper's decision to express it in the first

person – the victim herself speaking the agony of her own death. The protagonist of the novel, Stavia, says:

In *Iphigenia at Ilium*. [The poets make] what really happened to Iphigenia into something else. Really she was murdered, but that made the men feel guilty, so they pretended she had sacrificed her own life. (Tepper 1988: 72)

Thus in Tepper's play, it seems that Iphigenia's sacrifice was in fact completed as planned, and she appears to the Trojan women as a ghost. Iphigenia's ghost says that she is "Agamemnon's daughter, come from Hades' realm to seek revenge on him who killed her" (Tepper 1988: 34). Tepper's Iphigenia's attitude towards the men around her is decidedly vindictive; she blames them, not the gods, for her death, and her defiant and outspoken hatred of her own father is a far cry from Euripides's ([410BC] 1999) dutiful heroine in *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Tepper's ghostly, resentful Iphigenia is a clear subversion of Euripides's version of the character who, though indeed given some contextually unusual characteristics for a female character, ultimately seems to perpetuate ancient Greek gender ideology surrounding "good" and "bad" women by duly sacrificing her life so that men may make war.

Blondell et al. (1999: 51) write that "the virtue most vigorously demanded of Athenian women was *sophrosune* (literally "sound-mindedness")", which has no single English equivalent but can mean variously self-control, self-knowledge, deference, moderation, resistance to appetite, and chastity (Rademaker 2005: 6; Thorburn 2005: 267). In addition to this, one of the greatest social expectations of women in an ancient Greek context was to be loyal to their father and his family. Euripides's Iphigenia is presented as a contextually sound-minded woman who ultimately does what is best for her father, Agamemnon, and his brother – her uncle – Menelaus... she sacrifices her own life for their cause. In contrast, Tepper's Iphigenia has literally come back from the underworld to seek revenge on these male relatives. Ultimately, the fact that Euripides and Tepper have adapted

the Iphigenia myth in such different ways demonstrates their differing opinions on the meaning of Iphigenia's death; opinions, of course, informed by their differing contexts and purposes. Euripides represents Iphigenia's selfless act of sacrifice as almost comparable to the actions and characteristics of male heroes of her time; an ultimate act of goodness against the backdrop of Helen's ultimate act of badness to transmit an ideology of contextually laudable female behaviour. Tepper, however, directly contradicts this version of events by refusing to allow Iphigenia's death to take a quiet place in the annals of heroic history; instead, she has Iphigenia's ghost explicitly correct the poets about the circumstances of her own death. To Tepper, Iphigenia – not only murdered by her father and uncle so they may wage war over another woman, but also immortalised by poets as a “good” woman through her murder -- seems to become an emblem of the suffering of all women at the hands of violent, warring men. Tepper's warning about the effects of war on the female population may be motivated by her context in the 1980s in which the looming presence of the ongoing Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union became even more threatening when nuclear weapons were tested by both parties; an idea that also seems to have influenced the catastrophic “Convulsions” in her text. Tepper does not erase or even rewrite Euripides's Iphigenia tragedies, but rather reframes her by continuing the narrative initiated by Euripides through his initial Iphigenia adaptations, creating new possibilities for engagement with Euripides's canonical texts – and perhaps the classical canon as a whole – in contemporary contexts and in order to explore contemporary concerns.

This might be interpreted as an impulse by Tepper to reframe, reinterpret, and reimagine the classical canon rather than merely to erase or overwrite it. Tepper does not write the entirety of Iphigenia's story anew, but rather chooses to continue this story by bringing Iphigenia, Euripides's sound-minded counterweight to Helen's betrayer of husband

and family, back as a ghost who can voice her opinions on her former role in the texts of Euripides and other ancient writers.

Iphigenia's ghost brings us to Tepper's second strategy of adaptation – her inclusion of multiple ghosts in a play that seems to adapt the setting and action of Euripides's ([415BC] 1959) *The Trojan women*. It is difficult to imagine a more devastating representation of the Trojan War. In fact, *The Trojan women* (Euripides [415BC] 1959) opens on a god, Poseidon, taking leave of his beloved city of Troy due to not only the material effects of the war – the ruined city smolders in the background – but also because he feels that the war has resulted in the breakdown of religious practices (Croally 1994: 71). The city has been destroyed, the majority of the Trojans have been killed, the very gods have abandoned the city of Troy, and the royal women of Troy wait to become the slaves of conquering Greek men. Euripides's grim setting and startling portrayal of the inhumanity of war stand in stark contrast to previous narratives surrounding the Trojan War. Tepper continues Euripides's theme with the distinctly human scene of Andromache and Hecuba comforting the baby Astyanax before the smoke and destruction of their city. However, Andromache and Hecuba have no gods watching over them or lamenting their fate here; they are alone and at the mercy of the victorious Greek soldiers, in a world devoid of divine intervention.

Instead of Euripides's gods, who, it must be noted, are hardly glorified in Euripides's text, Tepper introduces ghosts – the ghosts of Iphigenia, sacrificed at the beginning of the war, Achilles, killed during the war, and Polyxena, sacrificed on Achilles's tomb to serve him in the afterlife. Johnston (1999: viii) writes that Greek myths often suggest “fears that the dead may somehow punish the living for the injuries or neglect they suffered”, and Tepper seems to play on these fears with her vengeful, ghostly version of Iphigenia. Ghosts, like that of Iphigenia, might serve here as a symbol of the past affecting the present – much like classical texts, far removed from their social context, might continue to affect contemporary



attitudes towards gender through their status as esteemed cultural artefacts. However, Iphigenia's ghost, freed by Tepper from the confines of her society and the accompanying social expectations of her role in Euripides's texts, is given agency. Both in *Women's Country* and, perhaps, in the context of the reader, Iphigenia is Tepper's strident and chilling warning against allowing the past to repeat itself; an example of what happens to women when violent men are in control.

Not only is the mere appearance of an uncalled and thus uncontrolled ghost unsettling, but in death Tepper's Iphigenia is also granted an opportunity to undermine the other receptions of her story. While the poets might wax lyrical about the immortality that the warriors have gained in the war through their heroic and honourable behaviour – since war was considered a properly masculine activity that demonstrated loyalty to one's city – Tepper (1988: 63) uses the “[petulant]” ghost of Achilles to subvert this. Ghostly Achilles approaches Polyxena, the virgin sacrificed upon his tomb to serve him in the afterlife, only to have her slip through his arms like mist and tell him that she is “no one's slave” (Tepper 1988: 273). This leads him, and the performers and audience of the play-within-the-text, to the uncomfortable realisation that everyone ends up in Hades together – death is death, regardless of the circumstances of one's life or death. Moreover, in death the warrior Achilles is rendered perhaps as powerless as Polyxena was in life; he says:

How can I force obedience on this? In other times I've used the fear of death to make a woman bow herself to me. If not the fear of her own death, then fear for someone else, a husband or a child. How can I bend this woman to my will?! (Tepper 1988: 273)

The great warrior finds himself with no way in which to assert his power over unwilling women, as the women are already dead. Rather than spending eternity walking among the gods as he was promised, Iphigenia tells Achilles that he is “but a ghost. [His] killing and raping done. [His] battles over. A wanderer among the shades” (Tepper 1988:

304) just like Iphigenia and Polyxena. When Tepper's Achilles realises that the immortality he has been chasing was merely a poetic construct, he breaks into tears.

But the wronged women, the vengeful ghosts, are unmoved by the hero's tears. Iphigenia merely asks Polyxena, "Tell me, did the men cry when they slit your throat?", and when Polyxena answers that they did not, Iphigenia coldly says, "They didn't cry when they were slitting mine, either" (Tepper 1988: 305).

Tepper's representation of Achilles is a fascinating subversion of the classical hero. Achilles is the noble, wrathful warrior no longer – Tepper's Achilles is portrayed, in his ghostly form, as a ridiculous figure with "that great dong on him, sticking way out and bobbing around like anything" (Tepper 1988: 48). He is petulant and whiny, seemingly motivated by lust rather than any heroic narrative, a threatener of women rather than a lover of them, and the contrast between this sullen Achilles and the cold rage of Iphigenia casts even more doubt upon preceding representations of Iphigenia, Achilles, and even perhaps upon classical narratives as a whole – exactly as Iphigenia is so determined to do. Achilles's ghostly existence in the play undermines the classical idea of the rewards of everlasting honour and glory due to heroes; he is confused that he is left a wandering shade when the poets have called him immortal and assured him that he is destined to walk amongst the gods. Iphigenia corrects him: "[the poets said] that you would be immortal while you lived, and may still be well remembered now you're dead" (Tepper 1988: 263), but it is clear that the poets' words are merely words – they do not reflect the truth of what happens after death, if Iphigenia's actual death and Achilles's unsatisfied ghost are any indication. Here it seems clear that the honour that Tepper thinks these men so desperately chase, wounding women in the process, is merely a fantasy created by poets.

Tepper emphasizes death as not only a leveller of gender, but also an escape for women from an oppressive patriarchal ideology. Euripides's patriotic heroine Iphigenia, for example, actually has only a nominal choice in her own death – the question is never whether she will choose to live or die, but rather whether she will act with dignity and awareness of her duty to her people and so choose to go willingly, or whether she will ignore these expectations and be dragged to the sacrificial altar. An escape seems an impossibility, given that an entire army demands her death and will do whatever it takes to ensure her sacrifice, so the young girl whose own father is prepared to wield the knife submits to the ideology that requires her sacrifice and threatens the death of not only herself but also her family and Achilles if she does not comply. As Tepper's Hecuba says:

Dead or damned, that's the choice we make. Either you men kill us and are honoured for it, or we women kill you and are damned for it. Dead or damned. Women don't have to make choices like that in Hades. There's no love there, nothing to betray. (Tepper 1988: 362)

In death, Tepper's Iphigenia is afforded the agency she did not have in life. Her ghost can declaim her suffering at the hands of her father and uncle, and refuse the lustful Achilles without fear of reprisal – since the dead cannot be threatened with death. This view of women's death as freedom from violent men is echoed in the other society in Tepper's world; the Holylanders, a patriarchal group in which women are completely powerless possessions of men, and whose oppressive social structure is motivated by religion and maintained through male violence. When the main character of Tepper's (1988: 299) text, *Stavia*, is kidnapped by the Holylanders, she says of one of the abused Holylander women that "it was as though she wanted to die, wanted to be already dead". This woman, Susannah, later commits suicide, and leaves a note which says that "it 'uz better bein' dead because [her husband] couldn't do nothin' to her dead" (Tepper 1988: 318).

Unlike the Holylanders, and Euripides, Tepper does not allow any blame to be apportioned to gods. Appropriately for work performed at religious festivals, Euripides includes the ancient Greek gods in every one of the plays that Tepper has adapted; Tepper's play, however, does not feature any of those gods. The myths surrounding the Trojan War are rife with incidences of the gods interceding in mortal affairs. In fact, tracing the events that lead to Iphigenia's eventual murder reveals the hand of a god or goddess at almost every turn. Eris, the goddess of strife, sent the goddesses Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite an apple marked "for the fairest", which caused a quarrel that was only settled when Zeus sent the goddesses to Paris, prince of Troy, to choose who should receive the apple. In exchange for this apple, the goddess Aphrodite made Helen fall in love with Paris and leave her husband – thus leading to the gathering of troops at Aulis. Moreover these troops could not sail for Troy because the goddess Artemis withheld the winds as Agamemnon had offended her. This, of course, leads to Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* ([410BC] 1999), in which Iphigenia's sacrifice must be made in order to appease the goddess so the men may sail to make war on Troy, and it is this same goddess that replaces Iphigenia with a deer at the altar. In *Iphigenia in Tauris* (Euripides [412BC] 1959), Iphigenia has been abandoned upon the island of Tauris by a goddess and is forced to sacrifice men to that same goddess; when she tries to escape with her brother Orestes, it is a goddess that prevents the king from keeping her on the island, and the siblings are granted safe passage home by the gods. *The Trojan women* (Euripides [415BC] 1959) provides a particularly contextually interesting portrayal of these gods as jealous and fickle, and has the women of Troy question their faith and dependence on such gods, but the play still maintains the gods' integral role in the events surrounding the war.

According to Blondell et al. (1999: 16), in Greek tragedy "the gods often intervene in human lives by inspiring a person with specific thoughts, feelings, or attitudes. This leads to actions which may be simultaneously ascribed to human choice". They go on to say:

This way of looking at things is sometimes called “double determination,” meaning that an event is viewed as “doubly” determined or caused, i.e., simultaneously caused on both divine and human levels. Such divine interventions normally do not violate human character, but express and define it. If a god fills you with strength or lust, this is a manifestation of your power or desire. (Blondell et al. 1999: 16-17)

That Tepper has removed the characters of the gods from her adaptation suggests a desire to remove the option of apportioning some level of responsibility to the gods. She has removed the “divine” level from the equation and so the actions of her characters can only be their own responsibility at a “human” level. Considering the patriarchal and misogynistic society of the Holylanders in *Women’s Country*, in which every abuse of women is justified by what their (male) god orders and desires, this makes a clear statement about who is truly responsible for the actions of the people in the play; not the gods in any sense, but the people themselves. As Iphigenia says in Tepper’s (1988: 35) play: “... don’t curse the Gods... It’s man who puts the blood-stink in their noses and clotted gore upon their divine lips”. While Euripides calls the gods into question through his severe depiction of the Trojan War and its effects on women and children, Tepper takes this a step further – her Trojan women effectively expose the gods as nothing more than the expedient creations of warring and bloodthirsty men, thus problematising both classical and contemporary motivations attributed to religion.

Tepper’s text is set after a series of events that Tepper calls “the Convulsions”, which are revealed to have been nuclear wars that have left irradiated areas of countryside called “devastations” in which animals and human beings cannot survive. However futuristic the timeline, the apocalyptic event has made society regress to a point simpler in many ways than our current world; the towns are able to generate a little electricity but most of it is used to make medical equipment and medicines, and so the lifestyles of the townspeople are simple in a way reminiscent of ancient Greece – they farm, they weave cloth, they cook on flames

and light the evenings with lanterns instead of electric lights. Women's Country is a curious mix of ancient and modern despite its futuristic setting. In addition, Tepper's world consists of many small, scattered towns suggestive of ancient Greek city states, but with each town named after the woman who founded it. There is an interesting parallel here between Tepper's future and the ancient world it adapts; Rogers and Stevens (2015: 18) note that "the strangeness of images of the ancient past is matched by the 'cognitive estrangement' of futures imagined in modern SF". This kind of doubled cognitive estrangement, however, makes the final revelation of the text all the more powerful. The women in this future have another means, besides death, of escaping the violence of men like Achilles and Agamemnon; they have a programme of eugenics aimed at eradicating the violent, warlike tendencies inherent in certain men. "*Iphigenia at Ilium*" (Tepper 1988) and the corresponding Euripides plays are used by Tepper to reveal the true nature of male warriors – those in the ancient Greek plays, those who caused the Convulsions, and those who now reside in garrisons outside Women's Country – and to demonstrate the inevitability of tragic consequences if such violence is allowed to continue. The plays also justify the secrecy of the Women's Council; their programme of eugenics is kept from both the warriors and the majority of the women, as Tepper seems to believe that the women in Euripides's plays demonstrate that women often internalize patriarchal values in ways that contribute to their own eventual tragedies.

Yet it would be reductive to claim that Tepper's text is merely an exercise in gender role reversal, casting men as violent savages and women as the saviours of humanity. Tepper complicates her representations of men and woman by placing the servitors, non-violent men who live alongside the women, in direct contrast with the violent, honour-obsessed men in the garrisons. Moreover, Tepper's women are not all aware of the true meaning of "*Iphigenia at Ilium*" like Stavia and the members of the Women's Council; in fact, Stavia's own sister is

in thrall to the warriors, fascinated by their narratives of violence and honour rather than fearful of their propensity for brutality and control.

Equally reductive would be to place Euripides and Tepper in direct opposition to each other in terms of their representations of gender. Critics have noted that Euripides's engagement with gender is unusual for his context; his work displays a marked focus on female characters, and these female characters often defy contextual expectations of women (Foley 2001: 13-14; Rabinowitz 1993: 12-14). This is quite clear in his *Iphigenia*, who is portrayed with many characteristics conventionally attributed to male heroes; she is brave, patriotic, and understands the social and political implications of her sacrifice with clarity unusual for a young woman of her era. Euripides's male characters are also often atypical for his time; Achilles appears in *Iphigenia at Aulis* (Euripides [410BC] 1999) but he is not presented as the hero of the narrative (Michelakis 2002: 90), and is in fact quite overshadowed by Iphigenia, who also stands in stark contrast to the uncharacteristically negative depictions of other male characters like her indecisive father and her scheming uncle. While I have explored selected ways in which Tepper indicts classical treatments of women and the influence of these representations on contemporary gender relations, she also seems to expand upon select themes introduced by Euripides, adapting rather than opposing many of his ideas to suit her context and so resisting an easy polarity.

Through her adaptation of Euripides's plays, Tepper comments on gender ideology in a continuum of time from ancient Greece to both Tepper's contemporary context and the future that she has illustrated in her novel. She questions the universality of the classical canon by demonstrating the distinctly problematic patriarchal ideologies inherent in examples from this canon, and uses strategies of cognitive estrangement found in both science fiction and the reception of classical texts to allow readers to explore potentially problematic aspects

of their own context through contexts far removed from their own. Her comic subversions of masculinity, like her petulant Achilles, reframe the narrative surrounding classical heroes and thus classical ideals of masculinity – ideals perhaps still present in contemporary culture due to the cultural capital of these classical texts and their status as instruments of transmission. While the structure of society in *Women's Country* initially seems to take a second-wave strong difference feminist stance which suggests that one of the innate qualities of men is violence, Tepper's inclusion of the servitors means that the novel cannot be viewed as a simple gender role reversal. Ultimately, Tepper does not seek to problematise *men* or *Euripides*, but rather the role of violence in narratives of masculinity and within a patriarchal tradition stretching back to ancient Greece, and to heroes like Achilles. Thus Tepper does not condemn men, but rather endeavours to save them from their own bloody history, which is made to seem honourable and heroic by classical writers – something that Euripides himself explores through his work, and a theme that Tepper amplifies in her own adaptation of the Iphigenia myth. The danger of the canon, she seems to suggest, is that it perpetuates certain toxic ideas about masculinity. However, as ghosts – echoes of the past affecting the present – both Iphigenia and the classical canon can be freed from their ancient contexts to challenge rather than preserve these problematic ideas. Tepper therefore attempts to reframe this central canon so that both women and men can recognise these ideas as harmful rather than fall victim to them; so that they do not become Iphigenia, but also so that they do not become her murderer.



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