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# **Adapting Greek tragedy during the War on Terror: Martin Crimp's *Cruel and Tender***

**Emma Cole**, University of Bristol

## **Abstract**

When contemporary playwrights adapt ancient tragedy they often distance themselves from their source, claiming that their adaptations are stand-alone plays that do not evince a complex relationship with the classical material. Martin Crimp differs remarkably from this, and is on record stating that *Cruel and Tender*, his adaptation of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, not only recalls the original's structure, but also engages with its metrical patterns. In this article I build upon Crimp's invitation to consider the two plays in dialogue by exploring Crimp's interpretation of Sophocles' Herakles figure, and the representation of this character in Luc Bondy's 2004 production of the play. I argue that Crimp's adaptation sheds light upon the performance dynamics of Sophocles' lyrics and can help clarify debates over the text. In addition, I posit that *Cruel and Tender* can contribute to scholarship on the connection between combat trauma and Greek tragedy. By examining two of the ways that analysing *Cruel and Tender* can transform our understanding of *Trachiniae*, I demonstrate how practitioner readings of the classics can provide insight into debates over dramaturgical uncertainties in ancient tragedy, and the means through which these can be clarified in performance.

## **Keywords**

Martin Crimp

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

War on Terror

Greek tragedy

Sophocles

*Trachiniae*

Herakles



Theatre practitioners have long used ancient tragedy to interrogate contemporary conflicts. Unsurprisingly, in 2004 and at the height of the War on Terror, Britain was saturated with such productions, seeing an *Iphigenia at Aulis* at the National Theatre, an *Ion* in Colchester, and two productions of *Hecuba*, at the Donmar Warehouse and the Royal Shakespeare Company, respectively. Yet 2004's most highly lauded tragic reception was not one of these staged translations, but rather Martin Crimp's radical reinvention of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, titled *Cruel and Tender*. In this adaptation Crimp maintained Sophocles' diptych structure and basic plot; however, he completely modernized all other elements to respond directly to contemporary politics, noting that 'The desire to "say something" can certainly be the inspiration [for an adaptation]. It was the inspiration for *Cruel and Tender*. I wanted to relate it to contemporary politics' (Crimp 2016). Sophocles' Herakles thus became an unnamed, war-damaged General, Deianeira turned into military wife Amelia, Lichas a politician named Jonathan, and the deadly hydra poison an organophosphate form of chemical warfare. These overt political resonances were not lost upon scholars and led to several investigations into Crimp's representation of, for example, the impact of modern conflict upon the public and private spheres.<sup>1</sup> Such a foregrounding of the play's contemporary resonances, however, can underplay the creative and complex connection to *Trachiniae* that Crimp's adaptation maintained.<sup>2</sup> Within Crimp's explicit contemporary framing lay a direct engagement with the original Greek text, including allusions to the gender dynamics, and even metrical patterns, of the ancient tragedy. In this article I consequently reconsider Crimp's engagement with *Trachiniae* to demonstrate how *Cruel and Tender* can not only inform us about the ways in which

classical tragedy can be transformed to engage with modern politics, but can also look back to and shed new light upon the ancient source text.

The dual ability of *Cruel and Tender* not only to comment upon its contemporary context but also to further our understanding of *Trachiniae* is one of the play's core strengths for scholars of Greek tragedy. Charles Martindale, for example, argues in favour of classical reception studies that figure reception 'dialogically, as a two-way process of understanding, backwards and forwards, which illuminates antiquity as much as modernity' (2013: 171). Irrespective of whether Crimp intended his play to fulfil such a function, his adaptation invites this type of analysis and can yield a range of insights into one of our most ambiguous extant tragedies. Here I explore those insights that pertain to both the relationship between tragedy and warfare, and to the potential effect of witnessing Sophocles' Herakles character in performance. The article begins with an introduction to the background of the *Cruel and Tender* commission, following which I conduct a performance analysis of the General's arrival in Act 3 of Luc Bondy's 2004 première production of the play. I evaluate the connection between Herakles' lyric passages in *Trachiniae* and the General's fractured dialogue in *Cruel and Tender*, and consider the ways in which both the play's dialogue and Bondy's direction can inform our understanding of such elements in *Trachiniae*. The second half of the article contains an exploration of the socio-political resonances of Crimp's adaptation, and the ways in which these too can shed light back upon broader debates about Greek tragedy. I do this by analysing Crimp's implicit characterization of the General as suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, with reference to other similar interpretations of Sophoclean tragedy. Overall, I argue that reading *Trachiniae* through *Cruel and Tender* invites a nuanced

appreciation of Sophocles' text that can assist us in understanding the performance dynamics and relationship to warfare that *Trachiniae* may have originally embodied.

Although Herakles only appears in *Trachiniae* in the last third of the play, it is well known that the commission for *Cruel and Tender* originated around this figure. Swiss director Luc Bondy approached Crimp with the idea of adapting either Euripides' *Herakles Furens* or Sophocles' *Trachiniae* when Bondy was in the midst of directing Handel's *Hercules* in 2003. From these two options, Crimp chose *Trachiniae* (Sierz 2013: 106). David Lan, the Artistic Director of London's Young Vic theatre, commissioned the project. Bondy directed the resulting production, which opened at the Young Vic on 5 May 2004 ahead of a European tour, with Joe Dixon performing the role of the General.

Crimp's General only appears in the third and final act of *Cruel and Tender*, in much the same way as Herakles is confined to the second half of *Trachiniae*. Two-part structures are not unusual within the Sophoclean corpus; *Ajax* and *Antigone*, for example, both follow a similar format and involve the death of their eponymous characters halfway through the drama. *Trachiniae*, however, not only features the suicide of Deianeira mid-tragedy but is also structured so that the two protagonists, Deianeira and her husband Herakles, never appear onstage together. Crimp argued, just days after *Cruel and Tender* opened, that this explicit gender split was one of the factors that attracted him to the play:

He [Sophocles] shows us the man only in the final pages of the text, broken and angry (the fate of so many traumatised soldiers), rotting like Kafka's abandoned beetle, while he devotes the major part of the play (and in this he

seems so modern) to a woman who struggles to deal with the man's absence, violence, and infidelity. (Crimp 2004a)

It is striking that Crimp perceives aspects of the play as modern, given that *Trachiniae* is infrequently staged or adapted in contemporary theatre. Brad Levett, for example, notes that the play 'has not had anywhere near the popularity, measured by either re-performance or adaptation, of the other extant works of Sophocles' (2004: 18), a sentiment further supported by Barbara Goward's claim that 'There have been few productions, adaptations or imitations to stimulate critical discussion or arouse a general interest' (2004: 32).<sup>3</sup> Several scholars have put this lack of interest down to the very diptych structure that Crimp found intriguing; D. J. Conacher, for example, argues that the play 'is, if not the most baffling, then the most mysterious of Sophocles' extant works' (1997: 22). Crimp's decision to retain Sophocles' format, and to turn what some perceive to be one of the play's shortcomings into one of its central advantages, foreshadows the ways in which *Cruel and Tender* can provide insight into the performance dynamics of ancient tragedy, as when produced it demonstrates the effect of witnessing Sophocles' bi-partite structure and gender framing.

Bondy set his production of *Cruel and Tender* in a sterile, furnished apartment on a thrust-style stage, with a soundscape containing the audible rumbling of airplanes taking off and flying overhead. The liminality of airport accommodation was an effective interpretation of Herakles' Trachis home, which his family occupied while he was in exile in *Trachiniae*. Within the context of the production's references to the War on Terror, the soundscape could also be read as subtly referencing September 11. The stage floor was covered with an ash-blue, nylon carpet, and the walls were

painted an eau-de-nil green with a one-metre high reddish-brown feature panel on the bottom of the stage right wall. Like Crimp's text, the set simultaneously alluded to both contemporary socio-political events and the ancient world. Dramaturg Edward Kemp, for example, stated that the design, and particularly its colour palette, was inspired by Pompeii and endeavoured to blur the boundaries between an anonymous modern hotel and the classical age to emphasize the tragedy's contemporary dimensions (Kemp quoted in Sierz 2013: 208). The Pompeian overtones were particularly evident in the dado-inspired panel and the marble bas-relief above the bed on the stage right wall; the latter depicted Pan copulating with a goat. The bas-relief was a copy of the controversial marble sculpture discovered in the Villa of Papyri, Herculaneum, in 1752 and now housed in the 'secret cabinet' in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples. The image arguably referenced the classical origins of the play and alluded to the dysfunctional sexual relationship it contains; Jeremy Kingston has further suggested that the controversy surrounding the sculpture, and the fact that it has traditionally been hidden from display, might also be pertinent, stating 'Perhaps in this lies the significance of its presence in Luc Bondy's production, for here is a play where secret purposes are forced into the light of scrutiny' (2004). Its central positioning, above the marital bed and between two doorways which led into a grey, nondescript corridor, foregrounded the corrupted union between Amelia and the General.

The General entered at the beginning of the third part of *Cruel and Tender*. The audience heard the character before they saw him, and when he finally appeared he was completely naked except for wound dressings, and a urinary catheter and bag. Joe Dixon is a tall, muscular figure; however, the skin around his right shoulder, chest, and back was heavily blistered, and he walked slowly, hunched over a walking

frame. The character's onstage behaviour further emphasized the deterioration of his body and mind. He alternated between lucid speech and mad ravings; for example, when he convulsed in pain he would often stop talking and count backwards in sevens to distract himself, and when he became frustrated with the housekeeper while she changed his urine bag he flung the contents of the bag at her, spreading his bodily fluids across the set confrontationally. The General's unpredictable, violent behaviour peaked during his central monologue, performed just a few minutes after his entrance. In this speech, delivered while sitting in a wheelchair to his son James, the General recalled the ways in which he 'burnt terror out of the world' and 'learned its language/intercepted its phone calls' (Part Three, Scene One, 57).<sup>4</sup> Throughout the speech the ancient play bled through, as it were, into the modern play. At the end of the monologue, for example, the General conflated modern terrorism with the multi-headed Hydra:

because for every head I have ever severed  
two have grown in their place  
and I have had to cut and to cut and to cut  
to burn and to cut to purify the world. (Part Three, Scene One, 58)

After this the General appeared to assume the character of Herakles, claiming to have killed the Nemean lion and 'the dog with three heads'. He ended his speech by repeating Herakles' epithet to himself, *kallinikos*, meaning 'gloriously victorious'.<sup>5</sup>

The General's dialogue contained some of the most explicit references to contemporary warfare that can be found in the play. The aforementioned statements delivered to James about eradicating terror, for example, reflected what Dominic

Cavendish called ‘shards of absolutely up-to-the-minute comment’ that pervaded the production (2004). Despite this contemporary outlook, however, the General also evoked Sophocles’ text in a number of ways. Crimp’s placement of the General’s entrance spoke to Sophocles’ diptych structure, and Crimp is additionally on record stating that the scene reacts to the metrical transition encapsulated in Herakles’ entrance:

I don’t have enough Greek to analyse verse, I simply have an instinctive reaction to form. It’s really obvious: if you look on the page, you can see how the verse form changes [...] there is a particular moment – it’s a kind of famous moment in *Trachiniae* – when the damaged figure of Herakles appears onstage you can just see from the choppy line lengths that something really deformed and unusual is happening to the structure of the verse. (Crimp 2016)

Although the General’s dialogue in *Cruel and Tender* held no lexical correspondence to Herakles’ lines in *Trachiniae*, Crimp’s adaptation of Herakles’ appearance can, at times, be thought to border on a form of sense-for-sense translation, as will shortly be made clear. Inspired by Herakles’ use of lyric, rather than spoken verse, Crimp had his General enter singing the Billie Holiday song ‘I can’t give you anything but love’. Furthermore, when the General began engaging other characters in conversation his lines became fractured and confused, indicating that he was mentally disturbed. He went from singing, to forgetting that his wife was dead, to raging at his attendants and son. This behaviour peaked during the General’s aforementioned monologue, in which he recounted the challenges faced during his tour of duty (Part Three, Scene

One, 57–58). During this speech the General appeared to grow increasingly paranoid, talking about children and bedside lamps as threats and eventually conflating his identity with Herakles’ and proudly recalling his labours. The General’s paranoia, delusions, and uncontrollable rage were not symptoms of his wife’s organophosphate attack, but rather of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It was through this mental disturbance that Crimp spoke to Sophocles’ ‘deformed and unusual’ lyrics.

There are two relevant passages in *Trachiniae* that Crimp likely based his assessment of Herakles’ lyrics upon, and I wish to suggest that considering these two passages and *Cruel and Tender* in dialogue is revelatory as to the type of insights that Crimp’s adaptation can provide into *Trachiniae*. In Herakles’ first major speech (993–1043) the dialogue turns into sung lyrics for a substantial passage. The relevant portion of Herakles’ lyrics is divided into strophe (1004–17) and antistrophe (1023–43), and is separated by six lines of hexameter, half of which are delivered by the Old Man and half by Hyllus. The beginning of Herakles’ lyrics is distressing, particularly due to the repeated, dramatic imperatives with which it opens:

ἔᾱτέ μ’ ἔᾱτέ με  
δύσμορον εὐνᾱσθαι,  
ἔᾱτέ με δύστανον.  
πᾱ <πᾱ> μου ψάυεις; ποῖ κλίνεις;  
ἀπολεῖς μ’, ἀπολεῖς.

Let me sleep! Let me sleep!

Unhappy one,

Let me sleep in my misery!

Where are you touching me?

Where are you turning me?

You will kill me! You will kill me! (1004–1008)<sup>6</sup>

The passage characterizes Herakles as delirious, a reading that is reinforced throughout the antistrophe section. Scholarly interpretations of this speech support Crimp’s identification of the lyrics as representing a key moment in the tragedy; Pat Easterling notes, for example, how in *Trachiniae* ‘Moments of high tension – the death of Deianeira, the arrival of Heracles – are marked as such by their distinctive metrical form’ (1982: 14). Despite this, however, the lines themselves are lexically not that unusual and the precise meter is, as Gilbert Davies has noted, ‘complex, but not obscure’ ([1908] 1955: 159–60). Furthermore, although the passage is peppered with onomatopoeic phrases and lyric clusters, such as the ἐέ distress cry that precedes the above-quoted lyrics, these are not unique but can be found in many tragedies. As such, although the passage is a heightened moment within *Trachiniae*, we should be careful not to overstate its uniqueness in relation to the wider tragic corpus.

The second relevant passage is Herakles’ subsequent speech (1046–1111), which is largely in iambic trimeters. Here Herakles is more lucid, contrasting his past labours and heroic triumphs with his present incapacitation. His vocabulary is graphic and arresting throughout; the poisoned robe is described, for example, as follows:

πλευραῖσι γὰρ προσμαχθὲν ἐκ μὲν ἐσχάτας

βέβρωκε σάρκας, πλεύμονός τ’ ἀρτηρίας

ῥοφεῖ ξυνοικοῦν·

For it has plastered to my ribs and eaten away my inmost flesh, and  
clings to me to devour the arteries of my lungs. (1053–1055)

The vivid speech reaches its dramatic climax, as Easterling notes, between lines 1076 and 1089 (1982: 204–05). In this section the dialogue appears to contain a set of implicit stage directions, dictating that Herakles display his wounded body to the other characters and consequently the audience. Herakles first warns Hyllus that he will reveal his body (1078) before commanding that all present observe his physical deterioration:

ἰδοῦ, θεᾶσθε πάντες ἄθλιον δέμας,  
ὄρατε τὸν δύστηνον, ὡς οἰκτρῶς ἔχω.

Look, all of you gaze on my miserable body,  
See the unhappy one, his pitiable state!. (1079–1080)

These imperatives are followed by a short lyric cry of pain, before Herakles continues evocatively describing the pain wracking his body. Easterling argues that a second lyric cry conveys the intensity of his suffering (1982: 205):

ὦναξ Αἴδη, δέξαι μ',  
ὦ Διὸς ἀκτίς, παῖσον.

Lord Hades, receive me!

O lightning of Zeus, strike me! (1085–1086)

Following this, Herakles begins to name individual body parts, the implication being that these are, in turn, shown to the audience. The passage is structured as a ring composition, ending with Herakles recalling the role that these parts of his body played during his labours and returning to muse upon his past deeds (1089–1106).

Crimp has argued that Herakles' use of lyric in these passages 'must have been the most extraordinary thing' in the ancient theatre, and that the scene was potentially shocking in the fifth-century première performance (Crimp quoted in Sierz 2013: 106–07). On the one hand, my analysis of the Greek makes clear that Crimp's isolation of these passages correctly identifies an exciting, dramatic moment within *Trachiniae*, which may indeed have shocked the original audience. On the other hand, however, it should be made clear that the fact that Herakles sings during his appearance is by no means exceptional. Edith Hall, for example, notes that Xerxes never speaks a single iambic trimeter in *Persae* (1999: 96), and Sarah Nooter explains that 'Not a single Sophoclean hero is content solely with iambic lines: Ajax, Oedipus, Antigone, Creon, Electra, Heracles, and Philoctetes all sing' (2012: 11). Rather than being an anomaly, Nooter suggests that instances of protagonists utilizing lyric may have enabled an ancient audience to recognize a Sophoclean hero, even positing that Herakles may deliberately use lyric in his main speech to create a poetic identity for himself, having lost his heroic one (2012: 78–81). Furthermore, it is entirely possible that the transition from iambic trimeters or hexameters to lyric metres may not have represented such a break in performance style for the ancient audience, given that ancient Greek was a pitch-accented language, rather than a stressed language like

English. The shock value of Herakles' entrance may, therefore, have lain just as much in the visual representation of the moment as in the verbal.

Despite the specific differences between Crimp's interpretation and the dominant scholarly opinions regarding the uniqueness of the passage, the shared attention given to Herakles' lyrics indicates that something interesting is happening at this moment in *Trachiniae*. Furthermore, we should be particularly attuned to the potential for this moment to be shocking or unusual, given that we cannot know definitively whether Herakles' lyrics were a regular heroic trope or an exceptional inclusion since only between 5 and 7 per cent of Sophocles' corpus survives. On the basis of our extant tragedies it appears that instances of characters utilizing lyric in dialogue were always arresting moments in the ancient theatre. Crimp's foregrounding of this moment as of particular relevance, I wish to suggest, thus indicates that he is a skilled interpreter of the dramaturgy of Greek tragedy. My comparative analysis of the Greek text and Crimp's 'instinctive reaction to form' (Crimp 2016) can consequently illuminate some of the aforementioned obscurities contained in this particular section of *Trachiniae*, as I will now demonstrate.

The General's monologue in *Cruel and Tender* was filled with ambiguities about the character's mental state and his understanding of the world. Despite the interpretive difficulties that these ambiguities represent, the monologue nevertheless worked to create an uncomfortable and powerful moment within the performance that brought home the cost of warfare upon both the individual warrior and the family unit. The effect of this moment, significantly, lay just as much in the visual image of the General's injured body and the visceral impact of his onstage behaviour, as it did in Crimp's dialogue. Irrespective of the role that Herakles' lyrics played in identifying him either as a Sophoclean hero, or as a standard or unusual protagonist, reading the

character through the General in *Cruel and Tender* reminds us that the immediate function of the lyrics was most probably akin to Crimp's adaptation of the passage, in that it stood out to the audience as an intriguing, emotionally affective moment which demonstrated the physical and psychological toll of Herakles' labours. Although one can isolate Herakles' entrance as an exceptional moment within *Trachiniae* without recourse to *Cruel and Tender*, viewing the tragedy through the lens of Crimp's play reminds us of the significance of performance dynamics to any understanding of ancient tragedy, and encourages us to take these into account when considering Sophocles' purpose in utilizing verse.

In addition to shedding light back upon *Trachiniae*, Crimp's reinvention of Sophocles' Herakles also looked forward and, in the première performance, resonated with the contemporary socio-political discourses surrounding the War on Terror. As previously mentioned, *Cruel and Tender* was part of a wider movement within the British theatre industry involving ancient tragedy being used to explore modern conflict.<sup>7</sup> The frequent instances of tragedy being linked with politics in performance echoed a concurrent turn to Greek tragedy in both political and feminist theory, a key example of which is Judith Butler's 2004 *Precarious Life*. Butler's volume featured essays that were 'all written after September 11, 2001, and in response to the conditions of heightened vulnerability and aggression that followed from these events' (2004: ix). The essays touch upon Greek tragedy and particularly Sophocles' *Antigone*, whose characters Butler reaches for when theorizing lamentation, suffering, and grievability following the increased politicization of such activities in the aftermath of September 11.<sup>8</sup> Within this wider movement, however, was a concentrated strand of performance receptions that utilized Sophoclean tragedy to think through the psychological cost of warfare, and I now wish to turn to this

dimension of Crimp's adaptation. Comparing the effect of Crimp's characterization of the General with other productions that similarly explore tragedy in light of combat trauma further reveals the extent to which *Cruel and Tender* can contribute to discussions not only about the text of *Trachiniae*, but also about the relationship between tragedy and warfare more broadly.

The General's fractured mental state was made clear just seconds into his first appearance in *Cruel and Tender* through a number of strategies. The General's dialogue revealed inconsistencies in the character's train of thought and an apparent diminishing grasp upon reality. It also contained several subtle references to elements of contemporary warfare that have been associated with psychological illness. For example, the General's central monologue featured a reference to uranium, which, as Clara Agustí notes, was a key term in the discourses surrounding combat trauma and the War on Terror:

It has recently been discovered that many US soldiers, after returning from fighting the War on Terror in Afghanistan, began to suffer from migraines and serious health problems, while some of the children they had after returning from the war had malformations. [...] It has recently been proved that these phenomena may be related to the presence of depleted uranium explosives used to attack tanks. (2013: 250)

The character's exit also resonated with the political treatment of combatants. Whereas earlier in the drama Jonathan, a politician, stated that the government had instructed the General to 'forget the conventional rules of engagement' (Part One, Scene Two, 13), he now claimed that the General's 'completely independent actions

have placed my government in a very delicate position' (Part Three, Scene One, 63). When Iolaos entered and arrested the General for crimes against humanity the General thus became not only a victim of combat trauma and chemical warfare, but also of political spin-doctors who appeared to be using him as a scapegoat for state-authorized war crimes committed during a conflict. Just as one version of the mythological tradition dictates that Iolaos traditionally helped build Herakles' pyre, here too he performed a form of character assassination, metaphorically acting as the General's executioner.

Crimp further emphasized the importance of combat trauma to an understanding of the General's psychology in what can be thought of as the performance's paratexts, such as the programme and production publicity. In an interview recorded with Dominic Cavendish just six days after the production opened, for example, Crimp described his General as 'a shell-shocked, mentally ill person' (2004). The number of explicit references to the War on Terror associated with *Cruel and Tender*, combined with the coinciding of the May opening with the release of images of torture and prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, meant that many critics picked up upon these combat trauma allusions.<sup>9</sup> Charles Spencer, for example, commented that Dixon's General had a 'ravaged, raving mind', which seemed 'to bring us close to the heart of contemporary darkness' (2004: 633). Despite the significance of this dimension to the production, however, *Cruel and Tender* is largely absent from scholarship on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and the performance reception of ancient tragedy, perhaps due to the status of the play as an adaptation, rather than a translation, and the subtlety with which Crimp introduces this concept.

Although *Cruel and Tender* invited the audience to view the General through the lens of combat trauma, the production nevertheless created ambiguity surrounding

the extent to which the character suffered from this illness. For example, at times the General appeared to be cogently seeking to exploit his situation. Before his final exit he enquired as to whether cameras would film his arrest, and after an affirmative answer he attempted to control the performative representation of his appearance by dictating the way in which his wrists were bound:

Make it cut – good – in front of the cameras.

Break open my body for the gods. (Part Three, Scene One, 67)

The General also proclaimed his innocence of the war crimes for which he was accused, and protested that he was being made to take the blame for politicians' actions. The combination of moments of perceived clarity and a denial of war crime culpability invited the audience to consider whether the General was really psychologically damaged, or whether he was perhaps performing in such a way to alleviate blame for his actions during the war. Crimp is on record as supporting the latter potential interpretation of his character, stating that he played 'with the idea that he [the General] was pretending to be mad to escape responsibility for his actions' (Sierz 2013: 107). As such, although Crimp's reinvention of Sophocles' Herakles evinced certain traits of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, explicitly ascribing this illness to the character was far from straightforward.

Crimp's decision to position the conflict underpinning the play not in the Middle East but in Africa, and specifically Gisenyi, Rwanda, where the provisional government was based during the Rwandan genocide, further complicated the connection between *Cruel and Tender* and cases of combat trauma during the War on Terror.<sup>10</sup> Crimp's General spoke to Laela in Swahili, and at one point stated

‘Cockroach. She thinks I’m a cockroach’ (Part Three, Scene One, 62) in an allusion to the derogatory term used by the Hutu population against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Combining the subtle references to the War on Terror with a conflict in Africa did not negate the political dimension of the play, nor did it cancel out the possibility that the General might be suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Indeed, it is possible to read the spliced setting as a form of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt*, which distances action in order to inspire a more analytic, rather than empathetic, engagement with the socio-political themes of a play. Nevertheless, the introduction of another geographical layer to *Cruel and Tender* did somewhat mediate the political emphasis of the play. It stopped the production from becoming polemic and helped foster a nuanced, multi-layered interpretation of *Trachiniae* that could not only be read as reflecting upon a range of contemporary situations, but also remained elastic enough to be applied to other, yet-to-be-realized political contexts. Such a slight obfuscation of the political commentary is common in Crimp’s work, which collectively evinces a critical point-of-view but does not make explicit statements in the same way as, for example, the political theatre of David Hare, whose partially verbatim response to the Iraq War, *Stuff Happens*, premièred at the National Theatre only four months after *Cruel and Tender*.

The complex connection that Crimp created between ancient drama and modern forms of combat trauma in *Cruel and Tender* contrasts substantially with other similar performative explorations of tragedy during and following the War on Terror. The most widely known example of this practice is Bryan Doerries’s 2009-to-the-present Theater of War project. The Theater of War programme is run for an audience of war veterans, their families, and caregivers, and consists of four different public health and social impact courses, all of which include readings of Sophoclean

tragedy. Doerries's events do not explicitly diagnose Sophoclean heroes with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder; rather, they aim to foster discussion about the psychological impact of warfare and to 'destigmatize psychological injury by placing it in an ancient warrior context' (2010).<sup>11</sup> The events include staged readings of Sophocles' *Ajax* and/or *Philoctetes*, followed by town-hall-style discussions between the audience, actors, military professionals, and therapists and/or military chaplains. The Theater of War has been run over 200 times in the United States, Europe and Japan, for a total audience of over 40,000 people. It has been internationally lauded, receiving \$3.7 million in funding from the Pentagon. The grant demonstrates the therapeutic value of such engagements with the classics, as the Pentagon does not have an arts supporting brief but one that focuses on the clinical care, prevention and research of psychological health.

The particular reading of ancient tragedy to which Doerries's programme appears to subscribe can be traced back to the work of American psychiatrist Jonathan Shay. Shay primarily works with Vietnam veterans suffering from severe, chronic, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. He was struck by the perceived similarities between the 'triggers', which caused combat trauma in his patients, and the path which led ancient warriors towards a particular type of *aristeia*, which Shay terms going 'berserk', in Homeric epic (1994: 77). Shay subsequently argued in his monographs *Achilles in Vietnam* (1994) and *Odysseus in America* (2002) that Achilles is a prototype warrior suffering from what we now call combat trauma, and Odysseus an example of a traumatized veteran struggling to reintegrate into civilian life following deployment. Shay posits that in antiquity tragedy was essential in assisting this reintegration process, claiming that 'Athenian theater was created and performed by combat veterans for an audience of combat veterans; they did this to enable returning

soldiers to function together in a *democratic* polity' (1995, original emphasis). By positioning combat trauma as transhistorical, Shay believes he can pave the way towards both destigmatizing this illness in public discourse and also unearthing ancient precedents that modern psychiatry can adopt for its treatment. Although both Crimp and Doerries are on record stating that they engaged with Shay's work during the research phase of their respective projects, it is only Doerries's programme that takes up Shay's invitation to use an ancient precedent to treat combat trauma.<sup>12</sup>

It is undeniable that Doerries's programme is doing important, valuable work, and testifies to the therapeutic power of tragedy to mediate traumatic experience. However, the project is nevertheless based upon what I perceive to be a somewhat selective understanding of the performance context of ancient tragedy. This selectivity can be seen in the way that the Theater of War website implicitly invokes Shay's argument:

The audiences for whom these plays were performed were undoubtedly composed of citizen-soldiers [...] ancient Greek drama appears to have been an elaborate ritual aimed at helping combat veterans return to civilian life after deployments during a century that saw 80 years of war.  
(Outside the Wire 2015)

Even a conservative view of the ancient audience, however, must take into account some non-veterans, not to mention at least the possibility of, for example, foreign residents, women, children and servants. Furthermore, several ancient historians, such as Everett L. Wheeler (1991: 125) and Louis Rawlings (2007: 48), note how rarely the Greeks fought pitched battles, meaning that out of all the veterans in the audience

it is likely that only a small portion fought in hand-to-hand combat and would be in need of a reintegration ritual. Out of those soldiers who did have battle experience, we cannot guarantee that they suffered the same kind of combat trauma as modern soldiers. Clinical studies, for example, have specifically linked both Traumatic Brain Injury and the hyper-vigilance required from soldiers serving in Afghanistan and Iraq to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, neither of which were factors in ancient hand-to-hand combat (Melchoir 2011: 218–19).

The presence of psychological illness in antiquity is a particularly contentious strand of current classical scholarship that is often explored via the Theater of War project. When reviewing a 2009 Theater of War event, for example, classicist and theatre director Peter Meineck questioned ‘Did Athenian drama originally function in this same way and provide a means of restoring citizen-warriors to society by presenting themes that would resonate with the actual experiences of fighting men?’ (2009: 196–97). Three years later he appeared to answer this question affirmatively, claiming that ‘Athenian tragedy offered a form of performance-based collective “catharsis” or “cultural therapy”’ (Meineck 2012: 7). Although Crimp’s *Cruel and Tender* neither had a therapeutic purpose nor sought to imply that the Sophoclean hero upon whom the General was based suffered from combat trauma, the play can nevertheless contribute to debates on the representation of the psychological damage caused by warfare in ancient tragedy. In comparison to Doerries’s Theater of War, *Cruel and Tender* presented a much more ambiguous portrayal of modern warfare, and as such arguably framed the connection between warfare and tragedy, both in classic and contemporary theatre, in a broader, more nuanced manner. As such, I wish to suggest that *Cruel and Tender* can provide insight into the ways in which Sophoclean tragedy may have resonated for a mixed-demographic audience. Crimp’s

play demonstrates the potential effect of tragic performances that had a function of fostering debate, in contrast to the Theater of War's illustration of the potential effect of tragedy with a primarily ritualistic, reintegration function. It is, of course, entirely possible that plays such as *Trachiniae* had a dual effect encompassing both potentialities; this gives scholars all the more reason to consider a diverse range of contemporary case studies when analysing connections between combat trauma and ancient tragedy. Considering *Cruel and Tender* in dialogue with other adaptations, such as those contained in the Theater of War project, can only help elucidate a range of potential scenarios and aid in our understanding of the relationship between tragedy and warfare in antiquity.

Scholarship on adaptation in performance often consists of comparative studies of an original and an adapted text, and explorations of the ways in which the original has been transformed to speak to a new socio-political environment or in line with a particular dramatist's agenda. My discussion of *Cruel and Tender* contributes to this trend by detailing the ways in which Martin Crimp transformed the character of Herakles from Sophocles' *Trachiniae* to engage with both the War on Terror and debates over the psychological damage incurred by combatants in modern warfare. In addition to this, however, I also considered the adaptation process in reverse, and investigated how looking at Sophocles' tragedy through Luc Bondy's 2004 production of *Cruel and Tender* transforms our understanding of the former play. Even when playwrights do not intend to aid in academic understandings of tragedy, their plays can nevertheless still serve such a purpose. Crimp's adaptation encourages us to reconsider the performativity of Herakles' lyrics, and the relationship between Sophoclean tragedy and warfare; it prompts us to look at *Trachiniae* in a new light and shift our focus onto less frequently considered elements of the play. As a

paradigmatic example, *Cruel and Tender* demonstrates how adaptations can provide insight into debates over dramaturgical uncertainties in ancient tragedy and the means through which these can be clarified in contemporary performance.

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### **Contributor details**

Emma Cole works in the department of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Bristol, where she is a Teaching Fellow in the Programme of Liberal Arts. Her research focuses on the reception of the classics in contemporary theatre. She completed her Ph.D. in the Department of Greek and Latin at University College

London in 2015, examining postdramatic receptions of ancient tragedy from 1995 to 2015. She is currently revising her doctorate for publication, and beginning a new research project on the reception of Aristotle's *Poetics*. Alongside her research she works as a dramaturg on new writing and classical adaptation projects.

Contact:

Department of Classics and Ancient History, School of Humanities, University of Bristol. 11 Woodland Road, Bristol, BS8 1TB, UK.

E-mail: [emma.cole@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:emma.cole@bristol.ac.uk)

Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For scholarship that explores the socio-political resonances of *Cruel and Tender* see, for example, Angelaki (2006) and Aragay (2011).

<sup>2</sup> There have been a number of comparative studies of the two plays, including Easterling (2004) and Sakellaridou (2014). Such investigations, however, have not explored how reading the Greek tragedy through Crimp's adaptation might transform our understanding of *Trachiniae*.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, which documents international productions of Greek and Roman drama from 1450 CE to the present, records just 24 productions – including adaptations – of *Trachiniae*, two of which are productions of *Cruel and Tender*. As the Archive is an evolving, work-in-progress database the quoted number is likely lower than the reality; however, comparing the *Trachiniae* statistics to those of other Greek tragedies remains indicative as to the play's general popularity.

<sup>4</sup> Crimp's script can be found in Crimp (2004b).

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<sup>5</sup> Kathleen Riley perceives traces of another intertext in this speech, namely Seneca's *Hercules Furens*, arguing that the General's monologue is 'a chilling speech reminiscent of Senecan Hercules' obsessive prayer for a new Golden Age, a homily mounting to paranoiac and autarkic frenzy' (2008: 345–46).

<sup>6</sup> All *Trachiniae* translations are adapted from Lloyd-Jones (1994).

<sup>7</sup> Tragedy was, of course, also used to explore the War on Terror outside Britain. A particularly relevant example is Barrie Kosky's 2008 production of Euripides' *Women of Troy*, staged at Sydney Theatre Company and Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of Butler's interpretation of *Antigone*, see Honig (2013: 42–50).

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of how *Cruel and Tender* was received in a different sociocultural context, see Hardwick (2014: 14–15).

<sup>10</sup> See Aragay (2011: 80) for details on the significance of the African setting.

<sup>11</sup> For further information on Doerries's programme, see Doerries (2015).

<sup>12</sup> Crimp describes reading *Achilles in Vietnam* in Sierz (2013: 107).