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On Anne Carson's *Euripides*

Laura Jansen

CB: [...] Did you come to poetry from critical writing, to poetry from prose, or were you exploring these different forms concurrently? Were you looking for ways to wed an academic interest in ancient Greece with creative pursuits?

AC. Distinctions [*between academic and creative spheres*] are obscure to me ... People worry a lot about them, why? The boundaries between “forms” (poetic, prosaic) are invented by us. The separation of “academic” from “creative” enterprise is demonstrably false and futile. Why pretend to respect categories like these?

C. Bush (2000), “A Short Talk with Anne Carson”

For the reader of Anne Carson (Canada, 1950-), her response in this interview comes as no surprise.¹ For almost four decades since her degrees in Classics, Carson has combined academic and creative categories to effortless, striking effect. Her own multi-faceted profile explains this trait in her oeuvre: she is a scholar, poet, translator, philosopher, painter, and essayist, roles that she performs with equally intellectual and artistic ambition. She collaborates with artists and directors, takes part in oral readings and performances, and has a long-standing record of delivering lectures worldwide to audiences both within and beyond academia. She has been the recipient of major prizes, recognitions, and fellowships, which include the Lannan Literary Award for Poetry (1996), the Guggenheim Fellowship for Poetry (1998), and the MacArthur Fellowship (2000). In 2020, Carson was honoured with the Princess of Asturias Award for Literature and the PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature. The jury for these highly prestigious awards recognised the distinctive, far-reaching character of her production, stating that this is what makes her profile *poikilos*, i.e. “scintillat[ing] with change and ambiguity” (PEN/Nabokov), and her encounters with antiquity “thought acts” that “elucidate the complexities of the current moment in time” (Princess Asturias). Indeed, Carson is a breaker of boundaries. It is rare to find examples of her work in which she is exclusively academic or artistic. Even her most scholarly writings, not least *Eros the Bittersweet: an Essay* (1986), showcase a discursive style that clearly marks a departure

¹ [Note to Readers: since the limit for this issue is ca. 90 pages, with each essay being ca. 3,500 words, it was agreed that the Introduction should be short and no longer than 2500 words. I have therefore focused more exclusively on Carson's profile and practice, her new works, and our engagement with them. There will be a footnote to a recent, more extensive discussion of her translation poetics and dramatic vision, which I am unable to include here due to anonymisation.]

from the established practices at the heart of her disciplinary training in Classics, especially if one focuses on small details: the critical and, at times, irreverent tone of her footnotes and prefaces; her aleatory, often humorous mode of argumentation; her experimental use of the page and gaps.² We also know that her cross-pollinating approach to composition and translation comes in great practical part from working simultaneously at three desks,³ and that this is one significant way in which she makes her connections with Greek and, to a lesser extent, Roman antiquity: with attention to the ancient language, texts, and ideas; by incorporating different media and materialities, including her own art; and with regular reference to points in (mostly Western) modernity.

This is the approach Carson adopts in her ongoing engagement with Euripides, six of whose plays she translated between 2006 and 2015: *Herakles*, *Hecuba*, *Hippolytus*, *Alcestis*, *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and *The Bacchae*. Already in *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides* (2006), a work that received rave reviews in non-academic publications such as *The New Yorker*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, and *The New York Sun*, one can detect the presence of a creative strand. In what may at first appear to be translations exclusively targeted at university students and academic researchers, the collection features a variety of details that broaden their appeal to audiences at large: playful omissions; transliterations of onomatopoeic sounds; alternative spellings; a distinctive use of colloquial, everyday English; and unorthodox distributions of lines, of which the zig-zagging choruses in her rendering of *Herakles* are an example.⁴ The fusion of scholarly criticism and artistic thought is equally apparent in the blurb and brief introduction to the collection,⁵ which also features an afterword in the voice of Euripides.⁶ In 2021, Carson added two more items to this list: *H of H Playbook* (hereafter “*H of H*”) and *The Trojan Women: A Comic* (hereafter “*Trojan Women*”), which together represent what is arguably her most ground-breaking dialogue with the ancient playwright to date. Her translations of Euripides in these new works become even more experimental, to the point that they could be regarded as “transcreations.”⁷ In the former, Euripides’ Heracles is now H of H, the mysterious central character returning to Thebes after his twelve labours in a translation-collage housed in playbook form. In the latter, meanwhile, the captive women of Troy take the astonishing shape of speaking animals stepping in and out of the individual frames of a graphic comic designed by New York-based artist Rosanna Bruno.⁸ It is no exaggeration to regard

² Nikolao 2022: 119-33.

³ See interview with Aitken 2004: 119-33 and Jansen 2022: 3-4.

⁴ For more examples, see Wilson’s review (2006).

⁵ Discussed in essay 1.

⁶ A practice that one finds elsewhere in her translations, most notably with Mimnermos in *Plainwater* (1995) and Stesichoros in *Autobiography of Red* (1998).

⁷ Bassnett 2022: 237-50.

⁸ See essay 9 for Bruno’s profile.

these new books as feasts for the imagination, and not just for readers of Euripides and Carson. They offer equal food for thought to readers interested in myth, drama, poetry, the graphic novel, translation and adaptation, performance, and art and design, amongst other themes. Carson's reworking of Euripides' plays into a playbook and comic is also amongst her boldest engagements with format (essays 3 and 6), and on a par with the innovative formal designs of *Nax* (2010) and *Float* (2016). *H of H* and *Trojan Women* furthermore present avant-garde transformations of the stage of ancient Greek plays and their casts. Without spoiling the content for those who have not yet read the playbook and comic, it should suffice to say that Helen takes the form of a sable fox, and that Herakles and Athena each wear an OshKosh-style overall, which is rendered a half-mythical, half-ordinary garment in a manner that speaks powerfully to Carson's radical portrayal of the hero and goddess in Euripides as modern, twentieth-century icons. Anachronisms abound in this context (essay 1), as well as deliberate repetitions (essay 2) and soundscapes (essay 8). The cast in both translations also inhabit dramatic environments full of natural and nuclear disaster, as they experience the trauma of captivity and violence, the fear of suffering and death, and the backdrop of long wars (essays 1 and 5). For readers of Euripides, one tangible effect of Carson's treatment is the simultaneous sense of familiarity with and remoteness from his plays, and it is this dimension of Carson's artistry as a translator that prompts a rethinking of the relevance of Euripides' tragedies in our own time.⁹ Of course, the books also shed substantial light on Carson's modes of connectivity with ancient Greek tragedy and the modern world, her Euripidean ethos and poetics, and, last but not least, the status of her translations as receptions of Euripides in their own right.¹⁰

These themes underpinned the call for contributors to "Anne Carson's Euripides," an online event held on April 29th, 2022, under the auspices of the University of Bristol Poetry Institute, Critical Theory at UC Berkeley, and Poetry and Poetics at UChicago. The event afforded the opportunity to discuss the recently published *H of H* and *Trojan Women* through a series of short "takes" by poets, artists, essayists, and scholars, all with interests in Carson and Mediterranean antiquity, but also in modern languages and literature, translation, poetry, performance, materiality, critical theory, art, design, and architecture. Each speaker turned a spotlight on the works, drawing attention to inflections, motifs, comparative contexts, audience diversity, formats, and practices. We explored these from a variety of scholarly and creative perspectives, most prominently: chemical poetics, (self-)repetition, the interplay of art and design and graphic art and narratology, neurodiversity, comedy and the comic, chimeric processes, and

⁹ Which is not the same as claiming that Euripides anticipates the social concerns of modernity and the formal strategies of modernism. See Gabriel 2021 on the German-inflected tradition of identifying Euripides as an "untimely modern".

¹⁰ In this sense, we conceive of the present issue as a continuation of the discussions explored in Jansen 2022.

soundscapes, amongst other interrelated frameworks. For this issue, we have deliberately preserved the sense of immediacy of the online format and delivery, with minimal, strategic revisions and expansions of the oral takes for their publication form. In one case, we reproduce *verbatim* the “viva voce” style (see below, essay 7). We have also included two new commissions from Zoom participants, one on *H of H* and narratological graphic art (essay 4), and the other offering the essay-interview with Rosanna Bruno (essay 9). At the heart of the “live” approach was our interest in producing readings of *H of H* and *Trojan Women* that speak closely to the breaking down of categories and boundaries one finds in Carson’s oeuvre and thought discussed above. We combined our own academic and non-academic interests with forms of criticism that, we believe, illuminate her artistic processes and philosophy of composition more capaciously. Readers of the issue will therefore encounter a variety of essay styles: some contributors entertain a multi-media format (“Zoom voice”, poetry, fragments, performative passages), others offer collages of personal **observations and frameworks which include visual art, notes, item lists, and/or a free use of the page-space, while some essays combine scholarly and creative formatting and content. Our rationale has been to adopt a critical mode that captures the level of innovation and experimentation involved in *H of H* and *Trojan Women*. More ambitiously, our goal was to situate the translations in an open field of investigation,¹¹ one that, crucially, aligns with Carson’s own interpretative strategies.** We have not aimed at full thematic coverage. Instead, we invite readers to follow specific lines of thinking which can be developed in further directions in future and/or can reinvigorate approaches to Euripides and Carson, as well as Carson Studies.¹² **As for the Table of Contents,** we were keen to let readers make multiple connections freely as they read the issue; thus the organisation of the essays does not follow any specific order, except for a movement from *H of H* to *Trojan Women*, with some pieces discussing both.

Essay 1, “*H of H* & the Combustion of Thought” (Laura Jansen), explores the atmospheric and catastrophic environments that punctuate *H of H*: storms, ice-breaks, volcanic eruptions, and nuclear explosions that give the tragic narrative an electrifying edge. It draws attention to a “chemical” poetics at the heart of Carson’s translation technique and thinking about Euripides’ play. This mannerism, also found in Euripides’s “combustible mixture of realism and extremism” (*Grief Lessons*, blurb), is not exclusive to *H of H*. It can be detected across Carson’s oeuvre – a

¹¹ See Güthenke and Holmes 2018: 53-74, who advocate for “[t]he ‘open field’, an embrace of the many different and singular configurations of knowledge that are coming to define the classicist in the twenty-first century.” (abstract); see also 63, on the importance of scholarly and creative dialogue and collaboration to embrace this model.

¹² For examples of the growing body of research in the category of Carson Studies, see McNeilly 2003, Wilkinson 2015, and Jansen 2022.

tendency to combust the reader's mind in ways that become a philosophy for re-reading Euripides and, more ambitiously, Carson's own sense of the tragic. Essay 2, "Repeating After Carson" (Rebecca Kosciak), looks at the theme of (self-)repetition in Carson's new works. Across her diverse body of work, Carson repeatedly returns to the objects of her preoccupation. From Lazarus—"a person who had to die twice" (Carson, *Nox* 2010)—to Herakles and countless other figures, themes, images, etc., Carson keeps returning to rework old ground. This essay adopts a repetitive approach to thinking with Carson's repetitions. It considers how *H of H* and *The Trojan Women* can be understood as in reiterative conversation with the poet's source texts, earlier examples of her own work, and wider thinking on the utility of repeating ourselves. Here, repetition circulates throughout Carson's writing, particularly around the unknowable divide separating the living and the dead. Essay 3, "Classics by Design: *H of H Playbook* and *The Trojan Women: A Comic* in Art and Commerce" (Patrice Rankine), examines the linguistic, artistic, and typographical dimensions of Anne Carson's *H of H* and *The Trojan Women*. It argues that graphic design and design-thinking principle provide a useful and unexplored theoretical framework for deciphering these books, given the often-complex relationship in them between image and words, and sometimes even words presented in different typeface and handwriting. Carson worked in graphic design for a time, and as a poet, words – and metaphor, specifically – are her primary design tool. Language works in tandem with image and form to create broader artistic meaning. Essay 4, "Blood in the Gutter: The Graphic Art of Narrative co-poiesis in *H of H Playbook*" (Genevieve Liveley), explores the narrative potency of the many silences and gaps, the holes and empty spaces, that shape Carson's *H of H Playbook*. It argues that the "comic" styling of this tragedy – that is, its formatting as a comic or a graphic novel analogous to that of Carson's Euripides' *Trojan Women* – engages reader, text, and image in a highly collaborative dynamic of narrative co-production. Essay 5, "Herculean Overhaul(s)" (Mario Telò), considers *H of H* as an opportunity "to push against the shaming of mental illness or neurological difference that is implicit in certain devaluations of paranoid reading" still prevailing in the critical academic field. With a focus on the playbook's materiality, it examines Carson's rewriting of Heracles' tragic madness as an "imagistic site" for rethinking paranoia, especially as an "aesthetico-political radicality located on the edge of a voiding of thought (*noein*)," a radicality that, as X argues, can be aligned "with modes of non-normate cognition, with neuroqueer countersociality." Essay 6, "Comedy in Carson's *The Trojan Women: A Comic*" (Ian Rae), takes the subtitle of Carson's translation as a start point. The subtitle, through the punning intersection of classical and modern senses of "the comic" as a genre, demands that the reader ask of her book: What is the place of comedy in a comic about one of the bleakest plays in the Western canon? In this essay, Rae shows that the comic elements of *The Trojan Women* help

to reframe the foci of Euripides' narrative and underscore, in a bitter irony, the disastrous impact on the Greeks of the reconciliation of the gods Athene and Poseidon. Essay 7, "The Trojan Women: A Chimeric Reading (VIVA VOCE in a Zoom Meeting)" (Phoebe Giannisi), reproduces *verbatim* poet-scholar's X's online take on Carson's and Bruno's play comic. The performance draws on Giannisi's poetry and installation-video art on the ancient Greek mythical figure Chimera, a "composite being, a creature where different species meet inside one body as various bodily parts." It interlaces commentary-poems, fragments, interviews, brief citations and personal notes. Each "speech-part" of this chimeric essay explores scene-setting, the motif of absence; animal poetics, and linguistic expression in the comic play, while underscoring the potential of Giannisi's approach to capture Carson and her own chimeric work. More ambitiously, the approach challenges fix notions of how academic and creative ideas should be framed and uttered. Essay 8, "The Enveloping Word: Soundscapes in *The Trojan Women* and *H of H*" (Sarah Nooter), examines two distinct modes of sonic disjunction in *The Trojan Women: A Comic* and *H of H Playbook*. *The Trojan Women* shows how noticing sounds that are dislocated from expectations exposes hard truths about reality. *H of H* interrogates our "regular" mode of hearing other people and implies that there is a gap in how we can know others and know ourselves. Thus, though both are graphic texts, their power and effect are nonetheless garnered also through the sounds they describe and conjure in the minds of their readers. Essay 9, "Slanted Translation(s)" (Gina Prat Lilly), combines an essayistic format with an extensive interview with Rosanna Bruno, illustrator of *Trojan Women*, for which Carson provides a creative translation. It discusses the collaboration between the translator and illustrator, especially the oblique manner in which they approached the tragic and devastating cosmos of Euripides' play. The interview with Bruno follows the essay.

The editor could not have hoped for a more receptive and capable group of contributors: poets, artists, intellectuals, and academics able to combine their collective expertise to great effect. Deepest thanks to each of them for their unfailing enthusiasm, intellectual ambition, and timely work. The editor would also like to thank artist Rosanna Bruno for her interview with Gina Pray Lilly for this issue. The last note of gratitude is for Anne Carson. Anne has commented on various aspects of her translations for this issue, patiently responded to questions, and generously given titles to her artworks for essay 1.

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