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Grecian Theater in Philadelphia, 1800–1870

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Abstract and Keywords

Between the death of President Washington and the Civil War, dramas set in ancient Greece or based on Greek models allowed Philadelphia audiences to simultaneously affirm and subvert their ideas about gender, race, and society. Greek drama on the Philadelphia stage before the 1880s was represented by adaptations, and often adaptations of adaptations, that are far from anything that a twenty-first-century audience would accept as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, or Aristophanes. The reception of Ernst Legouvé's *Médée* as both tragic drama and minstrel burlesque and responses to the real-life tragedy of Margaret Garner provide striking examples of receptions divided along the lines of race and class.

Keywords: Philadelphia, Medea, Ernst Legouvé, Adelaide Ristori, Francesca Janauschek, Thomas Talfourd, Margaret Garner, blackface, James Robinson Planché

PRESIDENT George Washington died on December 14, 1799.¹ Ten days later, on December 23, the curtain at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia rose on “an affecting scene of a tomb, in the center of which was a portrait of the sage and hero, encircled by oak leaves. On the pyramidal top of the ‘catafalque’ perched an eagle weeping tears of blood” (Davis 1957: 15). The producers of the tribute had prepared a carefully chosen mélange of classical symbols and civilizations. The eagle of Rome and the *corona civica*, a garland of oak leaves awarded to a Roman who had saved the life of a fellow citizen in battle, connected the Father of his Country to the founder of the Roman Empire, who had been given the title Augustus and awarded the civic crown in 27 BCE and in 2 BCE had received the title *pater patriae*.² The pyramid evoked the Great Seal of the United States, adopted seventeen years earlier, and caught the crest of a rising wave of interest in Egyptian symbols and building styles (Carrott 1978). The company of actors next assembled on stage and sang a composition by Alexander Reinagle (1756–1809), one of Washington’s favorite composers. Thomas Wignell (1753–1803), co-founder with Reinagle of the Chestnut Street Theatre, eulogized the late president. The show must go on, though, and it did. The Chestnut Street company had chosen one of Washington’s favorite plays, William Whitehead’s (1712–85) *The Roman Father*, based on Corneille’s *Horace*. At an emotionally charged time of national mourning and political anxiety, Wignell and Reinagle reached for the stability and clarity of neoclassical iconography and drama. Even though their Roman drama was an English playwright’s reworking of a French playwright’s adaptation of a narrative from Livy, Wignell and Reinagle’s introductory tableau invited viewers to look beyond the mediators and find consolation in the evening’s evocation of resonances between Rome and the new Republic. In this chapter I hope to explore what neoclassical drama meant to the citizens of Philadelphia in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century. Many of the features of the Chestnut Street Theatre’s commemoration of Washington’s death will recur: an assumption that (p. 54) the audience would understand and respond to classical iconography and actions, mediation through English or French playwrights, and use of the classical world as a lens through which to view contemporary American social and political concerns.

In a volume devoted to Greek drama throughout the Americas, some explanation is needed for its focus on a single

city. Histories of theater in America often amount to a history of theater in New York, where generous documentation allows due attention to important themes and events: class distinctions between audiences at the Park and Bowery, the Astor Place riot, the place of imported plays and actors, and so on. Yet Philadelphia was the capital of the country until 1800 and remained the second largest city in the country until the 1830 census, when Baltimore nudged it into third place.³ Philadelphia also had a thriving theatrical culture, and like New York to the north and Charleston to the south, it formed a focus of regional activity. Companies from the Chestnut Street and Walnut Street Theatres regularly toured south to Baltimore and west to Pittsburgh and Ohio.

Classical reception, also, is not a uniform phenomenon, and even within a single country regional differences can be observed. This is especially true for the United States in the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century, as geographical expansion led to increased pluralism and regional diversity. After the Civil War, on the other hand, the rise of touring “combination companies,” facilitated by the increased ease and range of railroad travel, and from 1896 the domination of the New York-based Theatrical Syndicate, led to a decline in the variety of local and regional theatrical cultures (Frick 1999). Exploring classical reception in a single city may lead to a richer, more nuanced picture of America’s long conversation with the ancient world.

The Theaters

For theater-goers in early nineteenth-century Philadelphia, engagement with the classical world began before the curtain went up, and even before they entered the theater itself. The three leading houses for serious drama were named after their locations on the city’s grid: the Arch Street, Chestnut Street, and Walnut Street Theatres. Prior to the Revolutionary War, Philadelphia’s playhouses had either been adapted from existing, utilitarian buildings, like the waterfront warehouse converted by Walter Murray and Thomas Kean in 1749, or if built as theaters, were as plain and unadorned as the spaces that they replaced. A contemporary witness described the Southwark Theatre at South and Apollo, built for the Hallam–Douglass company in 1766, as “an ugly ill-conceived affair outside and inside.”⁴ The Arch Street, Chestnut Street, and Walnut Street houses, however, declared their allegiance to classical and European models, and perhaps the status of their hoped-for audiences, in the neoclassical balances of their elegant façades, built from the designs of some of the young country’s leading architects.

When the earliest of these theaters, the Chestnut Street,⁵ opened in 1794, its red brick Colonial architecture harmonized with the State House (Independence Hall) a few steps (p. 55) away, but a remodeling in 1805 under the direction of its original architect, Benjamin Latrobe, gave it a Corinthian portico between projecting wings and an interior program with neoclassical and patriotic themes (Glazer 1986: 83–4). The Walnut Street Theatre underwent several bouts of remodeling, changing from an equestrian circus to a theater and back to a circus before becoming a theater finally in 1827. Like its rival on Chestnut Street, it invited audiences to pass through a Doric colonnade under six arched windows before they entered the auditorium. John Haviland (1792–1852), the architect of its 1809 structure, was along with Latrobe one of the pioneers of Greek Revival architecture in the United States. The Arch Street, built in 1828, boasted a Doric porch reached by a six-step stylobate in front of the two story main house, which was crowned by a pediment with a “standing heroic statue grasping a classic scene” (Glazer 1986: 61). In their architecture all three of these houses proclaimed to the outside world their participation in America’s reception of classical models and their affiliation with the Greek and Roman origins of theater (Hamlin 1944: 63–89). From the 1840s onward, also, “the commercial theatre became increasingly divided between ‘respectable’ fare for pacified bourgeois spectators and unrespectable entertainments for rowdy workers” (McConachie 1999: 147). It is tempting to suggest that the neoclassical façades of the Arch Street, Chestnut Street, and Walnut Street houses were intended to serve as gateways to admit the genteel and filters to exclude the vulgar.

The Plays

Once inside, Philadelphia audiences could expect to see tragedies, comedies, farces, operas both serious and comic, and a variety of other entertainments. On Wednesday March 2, 1859, for example, playgoers at the Arch Street Theatre were treated to Talfourd’s *Ion, or, The Foundling of Argos*, followed by a ballet (a pas de deux by “Miss Wood and M’lle Therese”), musical selections, and finally a one-act comedy, Richard Butler Glengall’s *The Irish Tutor*.⁶ The leap from neoclassical tragedy to dance to comedy was typical of theatrical evenings throughout

the period covered by this chapter; on Tuesday, November 12, 1867, the Walnut Street Theatre presented John Banim's *Damon and Pythias* introduced by an overture (see further Mayer, this volume). Instrumental and vocal interludes, including Schubert's setting of Goethe's "Erl König" and selections from Bellini's *Norma*, punctuated the acts of the drama.⁷

Plays drawn from ancient Greece or Rome formed only one part of Philadelphia's thriving dramatic culture in the nineteenth century. How large a part? A. H. Wilson's catalogue of mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphia dramatic life lists well over 3,300 titles produced between 1835 and 1855.⁸ Only about 36 of the 3,000-plus plays in Wilson's catalogue have titles that suggest a Greek or Roman setting or theme, and so it may seem that classical drama was not very popular among Philadelphia audiences in the decades before the Civil War. Sheer number of titles, however, may not be the most reliable indicator of either popular taste or cultural influence. Dramas that draw audiences (p. 56) to performances year after year could shape nineteenth-century taste in a way that repeated iterations of *Mose the Fireman* or comical *Yankees* could not.

Ancient Greek Drama in Nineteenth-Century Philadelphia: *Medea* and Others

Despite the reverence that devotees of high culture had for the origins of drama in ancient Athens, Greek tragedy on the American stage before the 1880s was represented by adaptations, and often adaptations of adaptations, like Matilda Heron's version of Ernest Legouv  's *M  d  e*. These adaptations use ancient Greek drama as a point of departure, and their course often takes them far from anything that a twenty-first-century audience would accept as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, or Aristophanes; Legouv  's *M  d  e*, for example, adds Orpheus as a character, and his *Medea*, unlike Euripides' heroine, can be seen as driven to infanticide—the last scene makes it clear that she loves her children, and in the final moments of the play, as she is pursued by a mob of Corinthians calling for her death, she stabs her children to prevent them being taken from her. The final words of Legouv  's play transfer the blame for their deaths to Jason:

JASON: Ah! Mes fils! ... morts, aussi! Tous deux! tous deux! Ah, l'horreur! ... Mes enfants! ... morts! ... Qui les a tu  s?

M  D  E: Toi!

In Heron's rendering: "Great gods, what is't I see? my children dead! who hath killed them? MEDEA: Thou!"⁹

In fact, if we define "ancient Greek drama" as the scripts of the four Athenian dramatists, no ancient Greek play appeared on any North American public stage until students at Harvard produced an *Oedipus Tyrannus* in 1881 (cf. Mayer, this volume; Norman 1882; Plugg   1938). Philadelphians had no opportunity to see ancient Greek drama in anything like its original form until the University of Pennsylvania's *Acharnians* of 1886 (Pearcy 2003). This performance formed part of a wave of academic productions of ancient drama in the United States, in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, often in the original languages, in the 1880s and 1890s.¹⁰ Between 1881 and 1903, 18 different colleges and universities put on 12 different Greek plays in 48 productions (Plugg   1938: 14–16). At least 16 of these productions were performed in Greek (Plugg   1938: table XI, 149). Until the 1880s, however, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes existed in American life as authors, not playwrights, and their scripts were known, when they were known at all, either as objects of academic study or as curiosities read in translation.

Most college-educated American men encountered Greek drama through the pages of Andrew Dalzell's (1784–1812) *Graeca Majora* (1789), a hefty anthology that (p. 57) included Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and Euripides' *Medea*. The first American edition appeared in 1809, and it was quickly adopted by Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Hamilton, and many other colleges and universities (Winterer 2002: 32–4). The Laws of the University of Pennsylvania for 1826 specify *Graeca Majora* among the required readings for the freshman, sophomore, and junior years (Snow 1907: 140–1). The second volume, containing *Oedipus* and *Medea*, appears along with Persius and Juvenal among the readings for the junior year, and so there is a good possibility that some elite Philadelphian young men first experienced Greek drama through the daily grind of college recitations. Others may have met Greek drama in a less formal way, through private reading or amateur productions.¹¹ Philadelphia, like other American cities in the earnestly self-improving early nineteenth century, had amateur dramatic societies like the Bothenian Dramatic Society, which met and gave performances on the fourth floor of an abandoned warehouse

(Winter 1913: 243). Perhaps one of these clubs attempted a *Medea* or *Oedipus*; if so, it has left no trace.

In nineteenth-century Philadelphia until the 1880s, classical Athenian drama was too alien, too academic, and too completely textual and literary to imagine on the stage. To find *Medea*, or any other ancient drama, on Philadelphia stages before 1881 we must look to what Edith Hall calls “the rich parallel life that ancient texts have enjoyed in post-Renaissance theatres.”¹² In many cases, especially early in the period under consideration here, an ancient myth in general rather than a specific Greek tragedy seems to be the inspiration for Greece on stage; for example, a pantomime, *Medea and Jason*, performed in New York in 1798 and again in 1800, 1801, and 1805, may not owe much to Euripides, especially if it is an American revival of either Gaetano Vestris’s *Medea and Jason* or George Colman the Elder’s burlesque of it, “*Medea and Jason, A Ballet Tragi-Comique* by Signior Novestris.” Both were first produced a few months apart in 1780.¹³ If it was the latter, then American audiences saw the ancient story re-enacted by characters from British panto: Jason as Pierrot, Medea as Mother Shipton, and Creon as Mr. Punch (McDonagh 2003: 50). Likewise a melodrama, *Theseus and Ariadna*, which appeared at the Chestnut Street Theatre sometime before 1810 and so antedates John Vanderlyn’s controversial painting of 1812, probably reflects general interest in myth, and not a desire to represent any specific text on stage.¹⁴

Even a play explicitly based on Athenian drama could draw from several different tragedies rather than attempting to present a single ancient drama on stage. Talfourd’s *Ion, or, The Foundling of Argos*, which had at least 31 separate, multi-evening runs in Philadelphia between 1836 and 1867, is not, despite its title, much like Euripides’ *Ion* or any other Greek tragedy. Talfourd himself wrote of his play that Euripides’ *Ion* “gave the first hint of the situation in which its hero is introduced ... but otherwise there is no resemblance between this imperfect sketch and that exquisite picture” (Talfourd 1846: 17). Audiences inclined to look for sources must have thought of Sophocles more than Euripides, and especially of *Oedipus Tyrannus* when they saw the play’s opening scene, with elders lamenting the plague that afflicts their city, or the first encounter between Ion and Adrastus, which evokes the exchange between Oedipus and Teiresias. *Antigone* may have contributed Ion’s deliberate disobedience of the tyrant’s edict and (p. 58) his insistence that “the eternal law, that where guilt is | Sorrow shall answer it” trumps Adrastus’ human law. Edith Hall suggests that “the motif of the patriotic youth’s suicide owes something to Euripides’ *Phoenician Women*” and that “the reconciliation of the dying king Adrastus with his long-lost son Ion powerfully recalls the endings of both *Hippolytus* and *Trachiniae*” (Hall 1997: 291). To these I am tempted to add two plays in which Euripides presents kings of Argos opposed by young monarchs with democratic leanings: *Suppliant Women*, which turns on the contrast between Adrastus, King of Argos, and Theseus, and *The Children of Heracles*, in which the young King of Athens, Demophon, is really a democrat in disguise, and another King of Argos, Eurystheus, becomes a more sympathetic character as his life ends, just as Adrastus does in Talfourd’s play.

Even so, Philadelphia audiences in the mid-nineteenth century could have received some impression of at least one play of Euripides, *Medea*, from a string of visiting productions between 1858 and 1886.¹⁵ These productions originated in European theater and came to Philadelphia on tour; they exemplify the growing power of touring star actors and companies made possible by the revolution in travel and communication that railroads and telegraph brought about. The earliest of this group saw the English-born actress Jean Margaret Davenport (1829–1903) brought in for three weeks in December, 1858, to give star power to the Walnut Street Theatre’s then struggling company.¹⁶ The recently widowed Mrs. David P. Bowers (born Elizabeth Crocker), a well-known Philadelphia actress, had assumed management of the Walnut Street in 1857 and attempted to revive the already obsolescent stock company system. The need to import a star like Davenport, like John Drew’s appearance a few weeks before, confirmed the imminent failure of Bowers’s experiment, and she gave up control of the Walnut on January 20 (Davis 2010: 115). Davenport appeared in two standards of the repertoire, *Camille* and Legouv e’s *Medea* in the English adaptation by Oliver C. Wyman, and she returned to the Walnut Street house for another turn as Medea in October 1859.¹⁷ M. Augusta Garrettson, a shrewd businesswoman who recognized the inevitability of the star system, took over the management of the Walnut Street in January 1859. Only a few weeks after Davenport’s second appearance, she brought in Matilda Heron (1830–77) for another *Medea*, this time in Heron’s own translation of Legouv e’s version.¹⁸ Although Heron, who had been born in Ireland, made her home in Philadelphia, she was part of the new system of touring star actors, as familiar to audiences in New York and San Francisco as she was in her home town. In her January 1860 appearance, Heron alternated her *Medea* with another signature role, *Camille*, and also brought her own new play, *Lesbia*, to Philadelphia audiences (see further Davis, this volume).¹⁹ Another visiting actress known for her portrayal of Medea, Avonia Jones (1839–67), appeared in

Heron's translation of Legouv  s version at the Chestnut Street Theatre for a two-week run in November 1863.²⁰

Two European actresses, however, Adelaide Ristori and Francesca Janauschek, performing in Italian and German respectively, defined Philadelphia's experience of Medea in the 1860s (see further Davis, this volume). Ristori appeared at the Academy of Music on December 10, 1866, in an Italian translation of Legouv  s *Med  e*. The *Evening (p. 59) Telegraph's* anonymous critic confessed disappointment with the "tamelessness" of her conception of the role: "At times she reached to the stern, inborn dignity and lofty command of the Colchian princess; but more frequently fell beneath it and became almost trivial."²¹ A few days later he was happier with her Phaedra and praised the same qualities of naturalness and reality that he had condemned in her Medea.²² This reviewer's response to Ristori's Medea may have been influenced by awareness of Euripides' text, or at least by a feeling that he ought to be aware of it: nineteenth-century elite theater-goers encountered Greek tragedy, and Euripides' *Medea* in particular, in the first place as a text on the page, and that experience colored their perception of Medea when they saw her on stage. Even a reviewer who, whether from lack of a classical education or fading memory of one, betrays his ignorance of the Greek original feels obliged to pretend to familiarity with it. In reviewing Ristori's *Medea*, the *Evening Telegraph's* critic remarks that "the 'Medea' of Legouve [*sic*], and the 'Medea' of Sophocles [*sic*], are two different creations," and he reinforces the literary orientation of his review by peppering it with what seem to be quotations from the play: "Yet enough remains of the original to recognize the dark enchantress of Colchis; she who, for the love of the 'yellow-haired Jason', stained her white hands with the blood of her young brother, and forsaking the barbaric splendor of the 'marble walls and roofs of gold' of Aetes' palace, dared the perils of the 'unknown sea' with the bold Argonauts of Hellas." Ristori toured the United States in Legouv  s *M  d  e* for nearly 20 years and returned to Philadelphia at least twice. The part was so identified with her that in 1870 Duprez and Benedict's Minstrels could hope to draw a crowd to their theater at 47–9 North Seventh Street for an evening including skits titled "Man Life Boat," "Medea, or Ristori Restored," and "Sports of the Arena."²³

The Medea most often seen in Philadelphia in the years after the Civil War, however, was not Ristori but another European actress, Francesca Janauschek (1830–1904), who appeared in Franz Grillparzer's *Medea*.²⁴ Janauschek appeared as Medea at the Chestnut Street Theatre in 1867, and the Academy of Music in 1868, at the Walnut Street in 1873, 1874, 1877, 1878, and 1881, and at the Chestnut Street Opera House in 1886 (Foley 2012: 279). Her performances in German attracted enthusiastic crowds from Philadelphia's large German-speaking population.²⁵ Attention seems to have focused, though, on her performances in other roles, on her celebrity, and, as she became more proficient in English, on her skill in portraying roles like Lady Macbeth. Both Ristori and Janauschek, in fact, represent a new kind of actress who emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century: the international star, known often by a single name—Rachel, Ristori—and famous as much for who she was as for the parts that she played. These actresses, as Shannyn Fiske suggests, concentrated on portraying intense emotions in a way that would move their audience to an analogous response (see further Davis, this volume; Fiske 2008: 30–5).

But what made Medea in particular a vehicle for stardom? What were Philadelphia audiences watching for when they saw Ristori or Janauschek as Medea (see further Boshier and Cox, this volume, for the very different audience responses to Ristori in Chicago)? Two intersecting cultural movements, I suggest, gave *Medea* special relevance for American theater audiences from about 1850 on. First, actual and potential (p. 60) changes in the social, legal, and existential status of women, subsumed under the heading "the woman question," became matters of cultural urgency. The various Medeas of the nineteenth century join in this dialogue by posing the question of what a woman can be.²⁶ Is Medea monstrous, barbarous, an "other" beyond comprehension, or is she recognizably the same as the women who, with their husbands, brothers, fathers, and lovers, filled theaters to watch Ristori or Janauschek? Contemporary responses suggest that Philadelphia audiences brought these questions to the theater or found them there when they arrived. Reporting on Janauschek's first appearance in Philadelphia, an anonymous reviewer in the *Daily Evening Telegraph* in 1867 noted Grillparzer's omission of Legouv  s character Orpheus and thought that this created a difference between his Medea and Legouv  s heroine:

If anything, this omission is an improvement, for it gives more decision and greater strength to the prominent *role* of the play, and demands an increased versatility in the personator of that *role*. Helpless, forsaken by "Jason," pursued with unrelenting hate by gods and men alike, the character of "Medea" is deprived of much of its usual barbarity, is made more human and less ferocious; and the strong love of country and earnest devotion to the welfare of her children which pervade it appeal irresistibly to the

sympathies of every auditor. M'lle Janauschek's conception of this difficult and imposing character is wonderfully faithful. She does not storm and rave, but, despite the harshness of her fate, is still human, and womanly withal.²⁷

On December 11 of the previous year the same or another reviewer for the *Evening Telegraph* confessed disappointment with Ristori's *Medea* at the Academy of Music, which he found tame and lacking in the "subtle effect" and "irresistible impulse of intense feeling" that he felt the character required.²⁸ Both responses reveal a concern to demarcate the appropriate range of *Medea's* passion. *Medea* had to remain recognizable as a woman, but to portray her as an ordinary woman risked suggesting that any woman, even those in the audience, might become a *Medea* (see further Davis, this volume).²⁹

By mid-century, American theater audiences included increasing numbers of women, and by the third quarter of the century women may have made up a majority, as they do now, in theaters catering to upper- and middle-class audiences (Butsch 1994). The audience for Ristori's *Medea*, announced the *Evening Telegraph* on December 10, 1866, would be "large, elite, and *distingue* [*sic*]." A decade earlier, renovations of the Walnut Street Theatre had included removing partitions between boxes so as to accommodate the newly fashionable hoop skirts (Davis 2010: 114). That change coincided with an expansion in the audience for classical, and specifically Greek, culture. Caroline Winterer has documented the ways in which a new turn from elite "Grecian" taste to middle-class moral edification in mid-nineteenth-century American classicism opened a door for women into the previously masculine world of classical learning (Winterer 2007: 142–64). Excluded from universities and the delights of *Graeca Majora*, middle-class and elite women could nevertheless find a way to the classical world through translations, mythological compendia like Thomas Bulfinch's *Age of Fable* (1855), and neoclassical drama. Greece especially was thought to offer examples of the kind of spiritual, (p. 61) moral, and emotional truths and experiences that were as available to women as to men. Women's involvement in popular Hellenism, expansion of classical learning beyond universities and their male graduates, and destabilization of gender roles created an audience for the Philadelphia *Medeas* of the second half of the nineteenth century.

The Other Greeks: Spectacle, Burlesque, Blackface

Neoclassical tragedies like Payne's *Brutus* and Talfourd's *Ion* or adaptations like Legouvé's *Medea* may have provoked thought and given the audiences who stepped under the classical porticoes of the Walnut Street, Chestnut Street, and Arch Street Theatres a sense that their concerns about authority in the family, social status, and gender roles had antecedents in the culturally approved world of ancient Greece and Rome. The ancient world, however, served other functions as well. Greece more than Rome provided matter for farce, parody, burlesque, spectacle, and other modes of dramatic representation that extended beyond the grave, political, and paternal subjects of plays like *Brutus, or, The Fall of Tarquin* and *Virginius, or, The Roman Father*. Yet in these less elevated genres as well, Philadelphia audiences could find cultural sanction for their beliefs about society.

Especially in the early part of the nineteenth century, Philadelphia audiences appreciated a good spectacle, and such pieces often stood by themselves as part of an evening's bill, without any dramatic structure or context. *The Siege of Oxydrache*, at the Chestnut Street Theatre on January 12, 1800, offered a pageant of pure action and called upon the city's military resources:

The antique battering rams were in full operation. The scaling of the walls by Alexander and his officers was exciting. The warriors were poised on the large Grecian shields of the soldiery, who formed bridges, one rising above the other like turrets or platforms of scaffolding, forming a tortoise, as it was called in the bills. Over this shield work Alexander, Hephestian, etc., sword in hand, with their scaling ladders, mounted and threw the rope-ladders over the coping of the turrets. They climbed up, fighting at every step. They severally gained the top of the battlements and precipitated themselves, apparently into the city. On the bridge at the back [were] overwhelming numbers in hand to hand contention—receiving the darts of enemies in a shield, plucking them out and hurling them back to the enemy. ... They employed real horses in this piece, clad in full armorial housings, or coverings, a kind of scale armor ... The march into Babylon was a most imposing processional exhibition. The properties, banners and trophies, with eagles, elephants, lions, etc., were composed of papier-mache [*sic*], in the most artistical style. The marching of the troops in sections, hollow squares and phalanx, were most admirably performed by eighty marines from the Navy

Yard, drilled by night rehearsals for this purpose.³⁰

(p. 62) *The Siege of Oxydrache* claimed to be derived from Nathaniel Lee's popular drama *The Rival Queens, or, The Death of Alexander the Great* (1677), but its military excitements remain offstage in that play. Another classically themed spectacle, the pantomime *Hercules and Omphale* of 1801, featured a "shower of fire" (Davis 1957: 45).

The 1830s and 1840s saw a vogue for classical burlesques with titles like *Hercules, King of Clubs* (Chestnut Street, 1839); first at the Walnut Street in 1843, it returned to the New Theatre in 1844, to the Arch Street house in 1847, and to both the Arch Street and Walnut Street in 1849. The most popular of these classical burlesques were the "extravaganzas" of James Robinson Planché (1796–1880). Planché's playlets, with titles like *Olympic Revels, or, Prometheus and Pandora*; *Olympic Devils, or, Orpheus and Eurydice* (both 1831); *The Paphian Bower, or, Venus and Adonis* (1832); and *Telemachus, or, The Island of Calypso* (1834), can still entertain because they depend on the humor inherent in transplanting contemporary sentiments, songs, and character types into the world of Greek mythology.³¹ They occupy a place between John Gay and Gilbert and Sullivan, "recalling the burlettas and pantomimes of the eighteenth century and pointing the way toward the comic operas of the late nineteenth."³² *Olympic Devils* had a brief run at the Chestnut Street in 1839, but in Philadelphia the most popular by far of Planché's sketches was the exuberantly titled *The Deep, Deep Sea or Perseus and Andromeda or the American Sea Serpent*.³³ It played at the Walnut and Arch Street Theatres in 1835, returned to the Arch Street in 1836 and to the Arch and Chestnut Street in 1837, and was revived at Barnum's Circus in 1848. More than Planché's other extravaganzas it appealed to American audiences. Planché presents the sea serpent in pursuit of Andromeda as yet another variation on the comical Yankee, described as "a Yankee-Doodle come to Town—'half man', with a Sea-gar in his mouth—'half horse', with an azure mane—and 'half alligator', with an endless tale" (Croker and Tucker n.d.: 1. 145). The phrase "half horse, half alligator" alludes to "The Hunters of Kentucky," President Jackson's popular campaign song of 1828, according to which Kentucky frontiersmen at the Battle of New Orleans made up a force in which "ev'ry man was half a horse, and half an alligator." A rash of reported sightings of sea serpents off the coast of New England from 1817 on may also have given *The Deep, Deep Sea* topical interest.

A Medea of a Different Color

Philadelphia audiences who laughed at the Yankee sea serpent in Planché's entertainment also found humor in another stereotypical character. The list of *dramatis personae* describes him as the "Black Cook of the Ocean, a white-livered runagate." Played by a white actor in blackface and speaking in exaggerated Negro dialect,³⁴ he appears only to announce the sea serpent with the words "Help! murder! massa captain; only look! ... Nebber see him any such man. Him sarpent!—dan a tousand cable bigger." Discomfiting though Planché's Cook may be to readers in the twenty-first century, he is not the only corked up comic character in the history of Philadelphia's reception of Greek drama. As we have heard, in 1870 Duprez and Benedict's Minstrels included "Medea, or Ristori (p. 63) Restored" in the program for their appearance in Philadelphia.³⁵ That blackface skit itself has left no trace.

The negative racial stereotyping of extravaganza and minstrel show finds its positive counterpoise in the use of classical paradigms to ennoble African-American resistance to slavery. Margaret Garner, the fugitive who killed her own children rather than see them returned to slavery, was compared to several figures from Greek and Roman antiquity; in these comparisons we can see black and white abolitionists and other anti-slavery advocates drawing on their experience of neoclassical drama to understand Garner's tragic action in significantly different ways. To James Bell, writing in the Canadian *Provincial Freeman*, Garner evoked the hero of James Sheridan Knowles's play *Virginus, or, The Roman Father*, who murdered his daughter rather than see her become a slave:

Thus, did a Roman Father slay, The idol of his soul, To screen her from a tyrant's lust, A tyrant's foul control. Though this was done, in days of yore, The act was truly brave; What value, pray, is life to man, If that man be a slave. Go and ask of Margaret Garner, Who's now in prison bound, (No braver woman e'er hath trod, Columbia's slave-cursed ground:) Why did she with a mother's hand, Deprive her child of breath! She'll tell you, with a Roman's smile, That slavery's worse than death.

(Bell 1856)

Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's poem "The Slave Mother: A Tale of the Ohio" also compares Garner to Roman heroes (Winterer 2007: 187). The *Provincial Freeman* was written, edited, and published between 1854 and 1857 by ex-slaves and freeborn blacks living in Toronto.³⁶ F. E. W. Harper was a black American poet. For them, the appropriate classical analogues for Garner were to be found in Rome; it was there that they sought patterns of self-sacrifice and heroic moral acts animated by a sense of public duty. In mid-nineteenth-century Philadelphia, African-Americans were forced to pay more for seats at the elite theaters.³⁷ This differential pricing reinforced exclusion of African-Americans from an important medium of popular bourgeois Hellenism, but groups like the Colored Reading Society of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Female Literary Association provided a space within which African-Americans could appropriate and refashion the literary taste and moral consciousness that classicism and classical education had given their white counterparts (Bacon and McClish 2000; Malamud 2011).



[Click to view larger](#)

Fig. 4.1 *The Modern Medea*, wood engraving after Thomas Satterwhite Noble's painting *Margaret Garner*, reproduced from *Harper's Weekly* (May 18, 1867).

Elite, largely white audiences needed to see Garner through a different classical lens. In a striking parallel to the multiply mediated Medeas on stage as audiences experienced Ristori's realization of an Italian translation of Legouvés reworking of Euripides' play, Garner became known as Medea primarily through the caption to the *Harper's Weekly* engraving of Matthew Brady's photograph of Thomas Satterwhite Noble's 1867 painting, *Margaret Garner* (Fig. 4.1). Noble's painting itself sets the confrontation between Garner and her pursuers in a stage-like setting framed by an open window. Downstage left, Garner gestures dramatically toward the bodies of her children center; facing her stand four slave-catchers, who appear to have just made their entrance, carefully blocked from upstage center to downstage right so that their various emotions and responses can each be seen and appreciated. Even whites sympathetic to the abolitionist cause, Caroline (p. 64) (p. 65) Winterer has suggested, were reluctant to draw parallels between acts of resistance by enslaved women and the heroism of ancient Romans. As Charles Darwin put it, an act that if done by a Roman matron would have counted as noble love of freedom was "in a poor negress ... mere brutal obstinacy" (Winterer 2007: 186). It may have been easier for the readers of *Harper's Weekly* and other elite whites to see Garner through the lens of Medea, the barbarian sorceress who, rightly interpreted and enacted by a Ristori or Janauschek, could be seen as animated by maternal love and feminine passion, than for them to understand her deed as an act of political agency. Resistance to tyranny, like other political virtues, remained the province of whites, men, and Romans.

Conclusion

Measuring the psychological distance between the Medea of Ristori at the Chestnut Street Theatre or Academy of Music and the blackface Medea of Duprez and Benedict's Minstrels only a few blocks away serves to remind us of the diversity of classical receptions within a single American city. Yet Duprez and Benedict's "Ristori Restored" could not have made sense without Adelaide Ristori's portrayal of Legouvés's heroine. Drama with Greek or Roman settings, based on myth, legend, history, or actual Greek drama, and always mediated through adaptation, translation, and imagination of the ancient world, allowed Philadelphia audiences in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century to affirm and subvert simultaneously their ideas about gender, race, and society. Hellenism, then as now, was a contested arena.

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Grecian Theater in Philadelphia, 1800–1870

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Notes:

(1.) Some material in this chapter appears in slightly different form in Percy 2003 and Percy 2013. An early version was delivered at Northwestern University on December 5, 2009 as part of a Sawyer Seminar series on "Theatre after Athens" (<<http://www.sawyerseminar.northwestern.edu>>), organized by Kathryn Boshier. Her memory continues to inspire my work on ancient drama and its modern receptions. This chapter draws heavily on the collections of the Free Library of Philadelphia, the Library Company of Philadelphia, and the Historical Society of Pennsylvania. I am grateful to Karin Suri at the Free Library, Cornelia King at the Library Company, and the other librarians and staff of those institutions. APGRD = The Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, Oxford (<<http://www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk/>>). Numbers following the abbreviation APGRD point to performances in the database of the Archive. References to *The Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia) refer to issues found in the Library of Congress digital archive *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers* (<<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>>).

(2.) Rembrandt Peale's 1824 painting "George Washington, Patriae Pater," now in the collection of the

Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, combines the motto “Patriae Pater” with the *corona civica* in an illusionistic “porthole” style portrait of Washington; see <<http://www.pafa.org/museum/The-Collection-Greenfield-American-Art-Resource/Tour-the-Collection/Category/Collection-Detail/985/let--P/mkey--1627/nameid--527/>> accessed March 28, 2013.

(3.) In the 1830 census Baltimore counted 80,620 citizens to Philadelphia’s 80,462. Philadelphia would drop to fourth place in the 1840 census, behind New York, New Orleans (which grew from 27,176 citizens in the 1830 census to 102,913 in 1840), and Baltimore. See Gibson 1998.

(4.) John F. Watson, *Annals of Philadelphia and Pennsylvania*, quoted in Rankin 1965: 112.

(5.) “Chesnut” appears to have been the regular spelling in the nineteenth century.

(6.) Playbill, Wheatley and Clarke’s Arch Street Theatre, March 2, 1859; in Scrapbook 12, 19th Century Playbills, 1803–1939, The Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Book Department—Theatre Collection.

(7.) Playbill, Walnut Street Theatre, November 12, 1867; in Scrapbook 62, 19th Century Playbills, 1803–1939, The Free Library of Philadelphia, Rare Book Department—Theatre Collection.

(8.) My rough count gives 3,346, including alternative titles; see Wilson 1935.

(9.) Legouvé 1854: 85 = Heron 1857: 56. On Legouvé’s *Médée* in Paris and London, see Macintosh 2000a: 14–17; and Hall and Macintosh 2005: 201–5. For the New York reception, see Davis, this volume.

(10.) For productions from 1880 in Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, see Macintosh 1997.

(11.) As early as 1676, at least one Harvard freshman was interested enough to purchase an edition of Sophocles; Morrison 1936: i. 197.

(12.) Hall 2004: 51–89; quotation from p. 58.

(13.) On Noverre’s ballet d’action *Médée et Jason* (1776), upon which Vestris’ Medea and Jason is based, see Lada-Richards 2010: 24–9.

(14.) Vanderlyn’s painting is now part of the collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; see <<http://www.pafa.org/Museum/The-Collection-Greenfield-American-Art-Resource/Tour-the-Collection/Category/Collection-Detail/985/mkey--2514/>> accessed November 26, 2012.

(15.) And even earlier from Giudetta Pasta’s 1828 tour in Johann Mayr’s opera, *Medea in Corinto*, which was at least known in Philadelphia; see *Philadelphia Album and Ladies Literary Portfolio*, September 24, 1831, 310, cited Foley 2012: 277–93.

(16.) APGRD 7087, December 10–24, 1858; for this and later productions, see also Foley 2012: 277.

(17.) APGRD 7088, October 17–25, 1859.

(18.) APGRD 7089, January 10–21, 1860.

(19.) Heron’s non-classical *Lesbia*, which is set in Venice, is not to be confused with Richard Davey’s one-act curtain raiser based on Catullus, which had its first performance in 1888; see Brown 1903: 442.

(20.) APGRD 7090, November 9–21, 1863. For Heron’s and Jones’s appearances as Medea in London in 1861, see Hall and Macintosh 2005: 423.

(21.) *The Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), December 11, 1866, fifth edition, 4.

(22.) “But if in *Phaedra* Ristori did not rise to the classic grandeur of Rachel, she gathered the character to her heart, humanized it, and made it natural,” *The Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), December 15, 1866, fourth edition, 8.

(23.) Advertisement in *The Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), January 22, 1870, fifth edition, 3. For the numerous

burlesques of Ristori's *Medea* in London, see Macintosh 2000b: 75–99; Hall and Macintosh 2005: 401–22.

(24.) For Grillparzer's 1821 version, see Macintosh 2000a: 12–14; and for the negative impact of Janaushek's appearances in London in 1876, compared to her popularity in Germany, Austria, and Russia, see Hall and Macintosh 2005: 424.

(25.) "Our German residents are greatly exercised about the appearance of M'lle Fanny Janaushek at the New Chestnut Street Theatre next week, and they will vie with their American-born friends in giving the great tragedienne an immense reception;" *The Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), December 11, 1867, fifth edition, 3.

(26.) Cf. Hall and Macintosh 2005: 391–429 on *Medea* in Britain.

(27.) *Daily Evening Telegraph*, December 17, 1867.

(28.) *The Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), December 11, 1866, fifth edition, 4.

(29.) On similar concerns about gender integrity in the title role in Talfourd's *Ion*, which was usually a breeches role in America, see Percy 2013.

(30.) Durang, quoted in Davis 1957: 31.

(31.) On classical burlesques and Greek tragic burlesques in particular, see Hall and Macintosh 2005: 350–90.

(32.) MacMillan 1928: 340. See also Diercks 1976.

(33.) Planché's original title was simply *The Deep, Deep Sea, or, Perseus and Andromeda*. For American audiences the sea serpent got top billing.

(34.) Black actors did not appear on American stages until after the Civil War; see Austin 1966.

(35.) Advertisement in *The Evening Telegraph* (Philadelphia), January 22, 1870, fifth edition, 3.

(36.) <<http://www.accessible-archives.com/collections/african-american-newspapers/provincial-freeman/>> accessed March 22, 2013.

(37.) At least through the 1850s, as playbills show, a gallery seat at the Arch Street Theatre cost 13 cents for white patrons but 25 cents for "colored persons."

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