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(En)gendered Meanings in *Oedipus Rex XX/XY*

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Several recent productions of classical Greek tragedy have employed cross-gender performance to highlight the gendered body on U.S. stages. Actors who identified as one gender played roles of another gender in Anne Carson's *Antigonick* (2013), Classic Greek Theatre of Oregon's *Oedipus the King* (2010), The Eleventh Hour Theatre Company's *Agamemnon* (2009), LAB Theatre's *Antigone* (2017), Lux et Umbra's *Antigone* (2015), and National Theatre of Scotland's *The Bacchae* (2008). Each of these productions interpreted Athenian drama through and upon actors' bodies in ways that provoked a consideration of the social and cultural workings of gender in various places and times. This article focuses on The Faux-Real Theatre Company's 2013 production of *Oedipus Rex*—retitled *Oedipus Rex XX/XY*—to investigate what its use of cross-gender performance may reveal about gender as a social construction.[1]

Oedipus Rex XX/XY broke with the ancient Greek tradition of all-male acting troupes by featuring a woman in the role of Oedipus, but adhered to ancient Greek practice by utilizing men in all other roles, including Jocasta. In its juxtaposing of cross-gender performances, Faux-Real's production represented gender as an act—an illusion that appears to express a seamless internal essence, but is actually created in and through its repeated performance. The production's point of view thus accords with Judith Butler 's theory of *gender performativity*.[2] Butler describes gender as neither a substantive attribute nor a central and continuous locality of self, but rather "an identity tenuously constituted in time instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*."[3] *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* denaturalized this "stylized repetition of acts" and, in doing so, demonstrated that Sophocles' tragedy can speak through and to contemporary understandings of the social construction of gender.

In its production of *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* at La MaMa in New York City, Faux-Real employed Robert Fagles' translation of the play. This translation retains Sophocles' attention to rhythm and imagery, yet transfigures the original's florid ancient Greek into lucid and broadly accessible modern English. The selection of Fagles' translation reflects director Mark Greenfield's intent to realize Sophocles' narrative of the ancient Greek myth while reconsidering the tragedy's social themes and functions from a contemporary and critical vantage point. Greenfield fuses select aspects of what is known of ancient Greek theatrical convention with twenty-first-century avant-gardism, metatheatricality, and physical theatre. The director applies this eclectic approach to accentuate, recess, and invert particular significations in *Oedipus Rex*. Cumulatively, these significations perform a deconstruction of the gender binary and interrogate the subject status of women in ancient Greece.

To suggest, however, that Sophocles' tragedy, as performed in antiquity, uncategorically upheld the patriarchal values of fifth-century Athens would belie the complexity of the text and context. Scholars have argued that Athenian drama both reinforced and critiqued social codes and gender norms integral to the patriarchal social order. Froma I. Zeitlin highlights the myth-making and religious propensities of Greek culture to produce dramatic plots and characters that transcend unambiguous man/woman identity positions and easy reinforcement of gender norms. Zeitlin points to the powerful influence of the divine feminine in the plays through the direct or invoked presence of goddesses such as Aphrodite, Artemis, and Athena, and of the god of theatre, Dionysus, "whose sexually ambiguous figure encourages role reversal and slippage of categories at all levels."[4] Such dramatic embodiments and invocations of the divine feminine often catalyze social forces that confound or mitigate men's dominance over women. In most of the tragedies and comedies, as Zeitlin observes, "men's efforts to subordinate women's roles, functions, and influences, their efforts even to appropriate these for themselves, are only partially successful."[5] Athenian drama thus offers opportunities to consider and reconsider the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities that arise in and through gendered social systems.

Furthermore, scholars point to the conservative and subversive implications of male actors playing female roles in antiquity. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz argues that men performing the roles of women in Athenian tragedy "played a double-role, both reinscribing patriarchy and providing a site of resistance to it."6 Rabinowitz posits that audiences perceived both the female character in the world of the play (as a function of the drama) and the enactment of that role by a male actor (as a function of ancient Greek theatrical convention).[7] For example, according to Rabinowitz, when Euripides' titular tragic hero Hippolytus accused women of deception, audiences may have received both the misogynistic meaning of the hero's accusation and a metatheatrical meaning suggestive of the deception involved in male actors' representations (and possible misrepresentations) of women on the stage. Receiving the plays' literal meanings in relation to an awareness of Greek theatrical conventions may have inflected ancient productions with double-entendres that prompted some spectators to reflect upon the fluidity of gender. Indeed, Marjorie Garber proposes that cross-gender performance "puts in question identities previously conceived as stable, unchallengeable, grounded, and 'known.'"[8] Judith Butler, however, asserts that cross-gender performance is not necessarily subversive in and of itself and may only disrupt the status quo of gender construction "to the extent that it reflects on the imitative structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced."[9] These various views on cross-gender performance open multiple possibilities for considering the reception of Athenian drama in ways that affirm and contest gender norms and the subversive potential of classical texts in performance.

The present inquiry probes the meaning conveyed by a contemporary performance of *Oedipus Rex* in which Stephanie Regina, who identifies as a woman, plays Oedipus; Tony Naumovski, who identifies as a man, plays Jocasta; and actors who identify as men play all other roles.10 What might this production's use of cross-gender performance illuminate about the social construction of gender? What might the production suggest about the operation of gender in a patriarchal order? To explore these questions, this article focuses on the performance's *corporeality* or social codes manifested via the use of movement, voice, words, costume, makeup, set, lighting, sound, etc. According to Susan Leigh Foster, corporeality forms an integrated network of social and cultural relations that conveys embodied knowledge. Foster posits that the legibility of corporeality contests "the dichotomy of verbal and non-verbal practices by asserting the thought-filledness of movement and the theoretical potential of bodily action."11 Hence, this article also analyzes the meaning generated via representative excerpts of Sophocles' text integrated *within* the corporeality of the production. Descriptions of individual actors' performances aim to create a sense of "being there," that is, to interpret corporeality as it unfolds in the moment of live performance.

She, Oedipus

Oedipus strides confidently on stage in burgundy leather work boots, hip-and-waist-defining brown leather pants with a thick black belt, and form-fitting top of silver-threaded mesh through which protrudes a white sports bra, its spandex shaped by the roundness of breasts. In consistency with Sophocles' text, Oedipus is always referred to with the masculine pronoun he. This Oedipus evokes 1980s, phallic-woman, rock-and-roll images à la Joan Jett, Pat Benatar, or Patti Smith. Yet the costume's brown leather and silver mesh also suggest animal skins and chainmail characteristic of ancient and medieval images of warrior masculinity. Regina's long, dark hair is pulled back into a tight ponytail and she wears no makeup. There is no attempt through costuming or makeup to disguise her female anatomy (we see breasts, hips, etc.); the spectator is constantly signaled that a woman plays the role of Oedipus.

Stephanie Regina as Oedipus and Dorian Shorts, Aidan Nelson, Matt Ketai, and Gökçen Gökçebag as Chorus

(Photo: Peter James Zielinski) 12

However, Regina's performance evinces powerful masculinity, not only through the "butch" styling of her costume, but most strikingly through movement and gesture. Her Oedipus walks with a wide-stepped, heavy-footed gait and gesticulates fiercely—pointing to his subjects, commanding his servants, and raising fists to his enemies—with the muscularity and resistance of arms that move as though strengthened by years of wielding swords and shields in combat. Regina's deep, grounded breathing supports a rich, alto-pitched voice that vibrates from her chest resonator; the boom of her voice fills La MaMa's ground-floor theatre. Her curt, "square" line phrasings hit hard upon consonants and de-emphasize vowels to maximize the forceful angularity and percussive rhythm in the language and minimize its lyricism. While her voice evokes fierce strength and confidence, she neither attempts nor intends to produce masculine baritone pitches. Yet, despite the constant visual and aural signs of the feminine, the virility of Regina's performance, which does not endeavor to create an illusion of being a man, but rather to engage in particular masculine acts, enables the spectator to easily accept her Oedipus as a man.

Stephanie Regina as Oedipus

(Photo: Peter James Zielinski)

In an analysis of the rich history of lesbian theatre presented at New York City's WOW Cafe (WOW is an acronym for Women's One World), Kate Davy posits that women in drag are "effaced because there is no institutionalized paradigm for reading male impersonation, [which] foreground[s] the male voice and women are erased."[13] But here the woman is not erased in the act of male impersonation precisely *because* her gendered body is mobilized to signal powerful femininity and masculinity. The butch aspects of Regina's corporeality, combined with the character traits inscribed upon Oedipus within Sophocles' text (e.g., combativeness, stubbornness, and pride), as well as the consistent referential of the masculine pronoun, facilitate an unequivocal acceptance (versus illusion) of this Oedipus as a man, while simultaneously presenting him as successfully inhabited by a woman.

The androgynous, contemporized figure of Oedipus is contrasted with Creon, Tiresias, and the Chorus, all played by men, in costumes more (though not entirely) akin to the traditional garments worn by men in ancient Thebes. The ten men in the Chorus appear shirtless in burlap skirts, black boots, and toga-like remnants of fabric draped across a shoulder or tied around the waist. In this manner, the costuming works to contrapose the theatrical Chorus as the ancient Greek patriarchal citizenry (male actors representing free adult men entitled to participate in Greek civil, political, and military life) against Oedipus as a contemporary exemplar of gender *disidentification*.14 According to José Esteban Muñoz: "To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject."15 In the case of Oedipus, the disidentification occurs in the performed act of a woman interpreting a man through both masculine and feminine corporealities. Thus, a woman—the other in the ancient Greek social schema—both identifies and disidentifies with aspects of her socially ascribed gender identity to critique the role of dominant male power.

Stephanie Regina as Oedipus, Ara Morton as Priest, and Aidan Nelson, Gökçen Gökçebag, Manuel Simons, Alejandro Santoni, Dorian Shorts, Alex Kryger, and Justin Dobies as Chorus

(Photo: Peter James Zielinski)

This argument does not suggest that women exercised no power in the tragedies or the social reality of fifth-century Athens. As the introduction to this article affirms, women and femininity play crucial roles and often resist the hegemony of men and/or masculine principles in the tragedies. Women are not passive beings who lack agency or fail to manipulate the levers of power in the dramatic worlds of the plays. Nor is power a monolith in the context of ancient Greek society. Power functions overtly and covertly, officially and unofficially, across multiple spheres and at various levels of any given social order. At the risk of oversimplification, it can be said that women were vital to the circulation of power in Athenian democracy, lacking full political rights but helping to produce a next generation of male citizens to inherit their husband's *oikos* (in this usage, the home as well as any slaves, land, furniture, and other associated assets).16 Through women, economic and political liberties were transmitted to successive generations of Athenian male citizens.

Nonetheless, Sue Blundell's description of the legal status of Athenian women points to the circumscription of power inherent in their juridical position within the city-state: "In law an Athenian woman had no independent existence. She was always assumed to be incorporated into the *oikos* which was headed by her *kyrios*, or male guardian."[17] From the cradle to the grave, women, with few exceptions, were under the guardianship of their fathers, husbands, sons, or other male relatives. Women could not appear or vote in the Assembly, appear or testify on their own behalf in court, or conduct major business or financial transactions on their own. *Pornai* (prostitutes) and *hetairai* (courtesans) may have had greater personal autonomy than other women, but they were, to some degree, stigmatized as "disreputable."[18] The ancient Greek patriarchal order was, according to Francisco Valdes, inextricably linked with women's social marginalization: "A woman was typically excluded from political and intellectual life, virtually uneducated, married soon after puberty [typically at 12 or 13 years of age] to a man often twenty years her senior, and thereafter sequestered in his home, while he spent most of his time outside it with other men."[19] While women did leave the home for specific purposes such as participation in certain public religious events, visits with neighbors, or the purchase of food or other basic household items, and some women worked outside the home out of financial necessity, their exclusion from civic affairs marginalized their interests within the androcentric polity of ancient Athens.

Jocasta as Androcentrism's Critique

In *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* Naumovski's Jocasta projects a strength, dignity, and regality that become fractured and, ultimately, shattered by fear, disappointment, and regret. Naumovski's portrayal embodies those expressions of the feminine that Zeitlin argues are a pivotal function of Dionysian theatre—"those often banned emotions of fear and pity"—to which men must open themselves by "playing the other."[20] This "open[ing] up [of] the masculine view of the universe" may, according to Zeitlin, have helped men to interrogate the self-assertiveness, intransigence, and hostility that circulate as part of the social and cultural currency of manhood.[21] The role of the feminine, in character and action, in classical tragedy is often to press upon and dislodge, if only temporarily, masculine values that alone prove insufficient to meet the demands of a complex world.[22]

In fact, Jocasta's first entrance is heralded by a Chorus Leader who recognizes her as the arbiter of contentious relations between Oedipus and Creon: "Look, Jocasta's coming, / and just in time too. With her help / you must put this fighting of yours to rest."[23] This remark invokes Jocasta's feminine intervention to resolve the dispute between her brother and husband over which man is most loyal to Thebes and how best to govern it.

Yet Naumovski's performance operates, via moments of emotional verisimilitude, to suggest Jocasta's sensitivity and caring not as symbolic universals that women represent in theatrical parables designed to ease aggression and enhance diplomacy between men, but as the deeply felt emotions of one particular human being subjected to and destroyed by a male- dominated system of power relations. A man's performance of Jocasta in parallel with a woman's performance of Oedipus re-contextualizes the representation of Jocasta's suffering as a critique of the masculinist social order that produced it.

In an operatic, almost Gaga-esque entrance, Jocasta seems to float into her first appearance in *Oedipus Rex XX/XY*.24 Her long, wavy, platinum-blonde locks caress silken, chartreuse robes, which flutter in the breeze like the billowing chiffon curtains of some Venetian piazza in a 1980s music video.25 Jocasta's white gown with halter top fashions a deeply plunging neckline, which exposes the body: Naumovski's bare and broad shoulders, chest, and arms are muscularly developed. There is no attempt to mimic female anatomy; there are no breasts in the halter, which lies flat against the actor's chest. He wears full makeup, but his acutely square jawline, prominent nose, and thick eyebrows harden and contrast the soft flush of rouge. This is not a female impersonation; this Jocasta is a woman played by a male-identified actor in a costume that is purposefully coded as both female and male.

Tony Naumovski as Jocasta, Stephanie Regina as Oedipus, and Aidan Nelson as Chorus

(Photo: Peter James Zielinski)

As with Regina's performance of Oedipus, however, Naumovski's gestures and gait demonstrate strong cross-gender signification. His Jocasta's arms move fluidly and delicately; her walk is measured in small, refined steps. She moves with utter grace, as though carefully schooled in the etiquettes of "feminine" virtue and beauty. Her voice is low-pitched, but her speech is highly melodic and her phrasings have a marked sense of rhythm and musicality. Furthermore, Jocasta, uniquely among all of the characters in this production, sings some of her dialogue—alternating dramatically between song and speech at key moments in the play. Song is used here to signify the feminine and, as in opera, affectively heightens and intensifies the emotional hues in the performance.

Jocasta's nearly six-foot-tall presence towers above the ten suppliant Chorus members who flank and groom her. Indeed, the queen's entrance has a powerful impact upon the Chorus, which, in various scenes of the play, mutates in its relationship to the principal characters in order to channel, reflect, or contrast the primary forces in the play. As Jocasta enters for her first scene, the Chorus assumes the affect of ladies-in-waiting, flanking alongside and spreading out behind her like a huge array of peacock feathers.
Jocasta, in a rich, baritone voice, sings to Oedipus and Creon: "Have you no sense? Poor misguided men, / such shouting [*then in recitative*] why this public outburst? / Aren't you ashamed, with the land so sick, / [*then in song*] to stir up private quarrels? / [*then spoken as a command to Oedipus*] Into the palace *now*. And Creon, *you* go home."[26] The Chorus quickly contracts into a tight cluster behind Jocasta, and together they issue a long "Ooooohh!"—the sound a group of children might make when another child is scolded by an authority figure. This is punctuated by one Chorus member 's hand flung up from behind Jocasta to give a snap of the fingers before retracting quickly back into the cluster. This is the sort of campy "snap" that says: you've been *served*! Indeed, camp is another technique this production employs as not only comic relief, but also a means to underscore moments in which the performance plays with and against gender
normativity.

Tony Naumovski as Jocasta and Matt Ketai, Dorian Shorts, Gökçen Gökçebag, Alex Kryger, Alejandro Santoni, Aidan Nelson, Derek Robert Smith, Justin Dobies, Ara Morton, and Manuel Simons as Chorus

(Photo: Peter James Zielinski)

One might argue that male actors playing the roles of women in ancient Greece functioned much the same way as Naumovski's performance to destabilize notions of masculinity. Kirk Ormand has explained that although Athenians in the classical period considered gender to be a fixed category determined by sex, they understood masculinity and femininity to operate along a wide continuum of possibilities.[27] Some degree of temporary feminization of men and, to a lesser extent, masculinization of women within particular parameters may have been considered conducive to the social order. In fact, Zeitlin observes that tragedy, including the portrayal of female characters by male actors, may be "viewed as a species of recurrent masculine initiations . . . and drama, more broadly, . . . [as] an education for its male citizens in the democratic city."[28]

Communions with the feminine were, however, temporary and calibrated to keep male initiates at a safe distance; the ritualized context of theatrical presentation with its formal conventions, whereby "manly actors . . . don[ned] body pads and feminine masks in order to play Medea or Phaedra [or Jocasta] . . . effectively served to insulate actors from any risk of a conversion that might carry over, dangerously, into real life."[29]

In ancient Greece, a man who dressed or behaved as a woman outside of regulated settings and traditional practices was especially vulnerable to the accusation that he had become feminized or womanish, which suggested he exhibited traits considered innate to women: passivity, deceptiveness, immoderation, and a lack of self-control. Such a reputation threatened the perception that a man possessed the honesty, prudence, restraint, and strength expected of the all-male citizens who shaped ancient Athens' legal, political, and military landscape. That a man could become feminized suggests the belief that one's gender orientation might shift along a continuum from masculine to feminine or vice-versa. Inherent in the notion of male feminization is the idea that maleness is the original or real starting point (associated with one's sexual organs). Hence, men's use of Athenian theatrical convention to play tragic women in fifth century Greece did not necessarily illuminate the "structure by which hegemonic gender is itself produced."[30] Rather, it is likely that men playing women in ancient Athens reinforced the idea of a gender continuum with two poles along which one may shift further or closer to one's initial starting point. This conclusion suggests that men playing women on the Athenian tragic stage functioned quite differently from Naumovski's portrayal of Jocasta in its contemporary context.

Indeed, the narratives of Greek tragedy offer further clues to the functions of the plays and their theatrical conventions. Male and female tragic characters who slide too far to the opposite side of the masculine/feminine continuum usually pay dearly for their "vice." Euripides' *The Bacchae* details the horrific dismemberment of Pentheus when he adopts women's attire and, even worse, women's wily methods of deception. Women like Medea or Clytemnestra, who take masculine action, are also punished for their transgressions of gender boundaries. Yet theatre itself, according to Zeitlin, was a feminine process, performing its beguiling acts of mimesis and disguise in honor of the gender-bending deity Dionysus. Tragedy was instructive in that it mobilized, in a time-limited and controlled manner, aspects of the feminine intended to teach men values such as self-control, moderation, and even forgiveness, but also the dangers of women's wanton and erratic energies, the agents of catastrophe if left unbridled. Of primary concern was the construction of a masculinity, modulated via limited initiation into the feminine, deemed functional for the patriarchal city-state.

W/woman-M/man

Although Faux-Real employs the ancient Greek practice of casting a man as a woman, it does so within the specific framework of its production. *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* points to the apparent inequity of the original cross-gendering, critiquing the convention by making single the double standard anciently applied to its two leading roles: Jocasta is played by a man, but Oedipus is played by a woman. That the production does not universalize this standard by casting women in all of the male roles serves constantly to scrape this transgression of ancient Greek theatrical convention against the convention itself. Moreover, this singular inversion of the binary implicates gender in the problematic of identity at the very heart of the play.

Tony Naumovski as Jocasta and Stephanie Regina as Oedipus
(Photo: Peter James Zielinski)

Those moments in which Sophocles stresses the tenuousness of identity assume a double-entendre that contests the supposed "naturalness" of not only the genealogical relationship of Oedipus to Jocasta, but also their respective gender identities. Thus when Tiresias warns Oedipus, "you're blind to the corruption of your life, / to the house you live in . . . brother and father both . . . son and husband both," the house Oedipus lives in is understood as not only the royal house of Thebes, but also his gendered body, which, in this production, is male and female *both*.[31] Upon learning of the actual circumstances of his birth, Oedipus implores the Chorus to obliterate him, "kill me, hurl me into the sea / where you can never look on me again."[32] The doubleness of his body cannot be looked upon; it renders him at once son and husband, brother and father, *and* man and woman. Concurrently, Jocasta is stripped of the nobility and dignity once associated with her unvarnished identity as wife to Oedipus and mother to his children. In being both wife and mother to him, she is neither. Oedipus proclaims "his wife no wife," his mother no mother.[33] Oedipus and Jocasta are unable to assimilate destabilized notions of their genealogical *and* gender identities.

Sue-Ellen Case posits that ancient Greek drama is not concerned with the presentation of woman, but with that of Woman: the idealized theatrical representation of noble and powerful female characters created and performed by men as a means to deny and conceal the abject and oppressed positions of women within the patriarchal social order of ancient Greece.[34] Case's well-grounded thesis prompts a corollary consideration of the noble and powerful male characters of ancient Greek theatre. The men, too, are not real people, but idealized, mythic figures: Man. However, these constructions of Man may correlate to those of Woman only if they are to be created and performed by women. There is the rub, for the annals of ancient Greek drama provide constructions of both Woman and Man created and performed exclusively by men within a tradition of hegemonic theatrical discourse, which promulgates and buttresses dominant, androcentric power.

Case's critique goes so far as to suggest that scholars and practitioners may wish to consider turning away from classical Greek drama altogether. While the intent of the present analysis is neither to discount the subjugated station of women in ancient Greece nor to refute the assertion that the Athenian plays of antiquity represent hegemonic constructions of Woman, it is possible to conclude that efforts to remediate such a masculinist project need not preclude the continued presentation of ancient Greek plays on contemporary stages. In fact, productions such as *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* are dynamic opportunities to redeploy and undermine patriarchal constructions of Woman in contemporary stagings of classical Greek plays, which may serve as embodied sites of deconstruction.[35]

Jocasta's final exchange with Oedipus as staged in the play demonstrates such inversion of conventional ancient Greek theatrical binaries. She pleads with Oedipus to desist in his effort to "solve the mystery of [his] birth" and implores him: "Stop—in the name of god, if you love your own life, call off this search!"[36] He turns away from her to ascend his royal pedestal (a simple black cube) and, for the first time in the play, Oedipus stands taller than Jocasta. She rushes to him, her magenta cape flowing in the breeze of her quick movement, throws herself to her knees beside him, and grabs hold of his ankles, those ankles she pinned together years ago to deliver him to his death on the slopes of Mount Citheron. She implores: "Oh no, listen to me, I beg you, don't do this . . . for your sake—I want the best for you!"[37] Oedipus shouts, "Your best is more than I can bear."[38] In a fit of rage, he seizes her skull in his hand and shoves her to the ground. Her blonde wig flies from her head and lands at the feet of the first row of the audience. In stunned silence, the audience and everyone onstage see that Jocasta (or Naumovski?) is bald. Is this a mistake occurring outside the drama or an intended moment of theatrical revelation? Are we in the midst of a liminal moment somewhere between fiction and reality? Are we in that in-between space that Richard Schechner terms "the not and the not not?"[39] Schechner theorizes performance as the site of specialized behavior that is distinct from real life, but that nonetheless constitutes action taken within real life—since reality precludes any existence outside of the real. Performance, according to Schechner, is thus not real and not not real. The action of the play seems to hang in midair as Oedipus, the Chorus, and Jocasta herself take in this corporeal moment of gender and theatrical liminality.

This absolute break with the performance of gender and theatrical convention, in which Jocasta's wig is cast off, reads so violently not necessarily because of the physicality in and of itself, but because the physicality embodies the psychological and emotional violence of what Oedipus' search for identity is doing to Jocasta. It strips her of *her* identity as the ideational Woman. No longer noble and powerful, she is vulnerable, degraded, abused. The hidden feminine interior is exteriorized; the inside site of "domestic" violence is forced outside into full public view. That state of physical and emotional undress is for behind closed doors only. The woman's sphere inside the home is where she removes her wig, make-up, and clothing. Metatheatrically, this moment also operates as an embodied metaphor for exposure: the actor performs being out of costume onstage, for it is only within the dressing room, the actor's interior sphere, that the removal of a costume piece such as Jocasta's wig is sanctioned. In this moment of exposure, masculinist brutality and its effect upon women is enacted *through* the gender reversal. That a woman (Regina) plays at being a man (Oedipus) who physically assaults a woman (Jocasta) played by a man (Naumovski) exposes the socially destructive violence that patriarchy performs on and through women's bodies.

Oedipus performs this assault publicly before the royal palace of Thebes and its citizens. What would usually occur in the home is brought out into the open. We are witness to a "bald" act of violence, a type of violence that might be narrated, but never enacted upon the stages of ancient Greece. This act provokes consideration of the dematerializing effect of language, the way it can work to naturalize (or domesticate) violence against women. The very term "domestic violence" positions violence as something less than violence when it occurs inside the home. It suggests the obfuscation illuminated by the Virginia Woolf quotation from *A Room of One's Own* cited in preface to Kirk Ormand's essay, "Oedipus the Queen: Cross-gendering without Drag": ". . . if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance . . . as great as a man, some think even greater. But this is woman in fiction. In fact . . . she was locked up, beaten and flung about the room."[40]

Who is behind the veil of Woman, the idealized female character that disguises the subjugation women faced in ancient Greek society? When Jocasta's wig is forcefully removed, we are confronted with a man. Simultaneously, this terrified, bald "half man" in drag makeup, but denuded of Jocasta's platinum wig, may be interpreted as woman's subjugated phallus (the symbolic representation of power that derives from, but does not require, the possession of a penis). It is unacceptable that (lower-case "w") woman's phallus is metaphorically revealed, untenable within the patriarchal social construct and, therefore, Jocasta must end her own life. We witness in the action—in that corporeal embodiment on stage—what we would never have been privy to on the stages of ancient Greece: the disrobing of man's make-believe version of Woman. The woman who plays Man has rendered as failure the performance of the man who plays Woman. To see a scared and vulnerable (lower-case "m") man behind that mask, to see him no longer able to play Woman, is to see the failure of the *surrogate*.[41]

Joseph Roach describes surrogates as social substitutes or compensation proposed to fill voids generated by disappearance, death, or enslavement. Jocasta's de-wigging betrays the surrogation of woman by Woman. Thus the hand of the ancient Greek masculinist is revealed in his failed attempt to determine how Woman shall be represented upon the stage.

Gender Fail

The heavy silence that fills this grotesque moment during Jocasta and Oedipus' final scene together represents also the failure of language to suggest that when gender identity is exposed as performance, that is to say, when it is performed "badly" or intentionally misperformed, there is the potential for a collapse of signification. Failure in the performance of gender—like incest—is taboo in the social order and answerable to its severest punishments. Jocasta pleads with Oedipus to forgo knowledge of his birth; unable to turn back, he literally casts her aside in pursuit of his identity. Jocasta is rendered powerless in the presentation of her gendered body. Her identity is negated, as she (unlike Oedipus) does not *choose* to identify but is revealed against her will. This violation is the opposite of disidentification: rape, abuse, outing? Jocasta is exposed as that which is considered an apex of disgrace and social taboo, a revelation that is too much for the soul to bear.

This production corporealizes the breakdown of the social order not only through the mutilation and destruction of Oedipus and Jocasta's bodies according to Sophocles' text, but also through the gendered bodies of Jocasta and Oedipus. As the play moves towards its climax of blinding and suicide, Regina and Naumovski's bodies shift towards more polarized gender positions. Jocasta's wig is cast off to reveal Naumovski's bald head. Conversely, when Oedipus emerges blind and mutilated from the palace, Regina's hair is no longer pulled back in a ponytail, but is now loose and flowing. Her breasts are accentuated in a tank t-shirt, and she wears the type of burlap skirt worn by the Chorus.[42] Yet Oedipus does *not* wear the tunic pieces worn by the male Chorus members, which tend to frame their burlap skirts as pieces of men's period dress. Regina's flowing, disheveled locks and tank-top newly signify the burlap skirt as a more contemporary marker of femininity. Oedipus is stripped of his burgundy work boots and wanders plaintively in bare feet across the stage. Most indelibly, a mask of gore across his upper face is sculpted with the "nerves and clots—black hail of blood pulsing, gushing down," which "spurts from the roots" of his gouged-out eye sockets.[43] Jutting from their sockets and suspended in midair are his two large, veined, and bloody eyeballs—hideous and otherworldly. In this highly gendered production, it is possible to see these eyeballs as symbolic of disembodied testicles, his feminized body penetrated and castrated by "the long gold pins" of Jocasta's brooches.[44]

Stephanie Regina as Oedipus
(Photo: Peter James Zielinski)

A poignant reminder of the contingent and tenuous constitution of identity, Jocasta's suicide calls to mind the high incidence of suicide, prompted by severe discrimination, among transgender populations.**45** *The Los Angeles Times* recently chronicled the death of Taylor Alesana, a sixteen year old transgender girl, who hung herself after facing relentless bullying and ostracism at school; the *Times of India* reported the story of Aparna, a twenty-seven year old transgender woman, who hung herself from the ceiling of her home after her mother disowned her; and media outlets have reported similar events in far-flung regions of the globe.**46** In ancient Greek drama, suicide is nearly always performed by female characters.**47** Faux-Real's *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* multi-accentually reframes the gender associations of Jocasta's suicide not as a feminine act of weakness, but as a response to violence and degradation wrought by intractable, binarized identity positions that always already constitute the other in the project of their construction. It may be argued as well that Oedipus' penetrative blinding as embodied in this gendered production conjures associations with the 1993 rape and murder of transgender man Brandon Teena in Humboldt, Nebraska, which came to national attention not at the time the crime was committed, but when Hilary Swank won an Academy Award for her portrayal of Teena in Kimberley Peirce's film *Boys Don't Cry*.**48**

Ormand posits that the final moments of the play illustrate the dramatic shift in power from Oedipus to Creon by mimicking aspects of an ancient Greek wedding procession. The power of kingship transfers to Creon through a symbolic marriage to Oedipus. No longer masculine, Oedipus is now in the abject position of woman; she, Oedipus, is a mutilated queen. According to Ormand's matrimonial hypothesis, the feminization of Oedipus in this scene is contrasted strongly with Creon's masculinization. Indeed, in Faux-Real's production, Creon enters in exaggerated, twelve-inch-high platform combat boots in black leather, secured with silver military buckles up to the knee.[49] He towers above Oedipus just as Oedipus earlier towered above Jocasta (through whom the power of kingship had once transferred to Oedipus). But Creon does not lead this feminized Oedipus off the stage in a parodied ancient Greek wedding procession, as Ormand argues is indicated in Sophocles' text.[50] Requiring less force than Oedipus used when violently pushing the plaintive Jocasta earlier in the play, Creon simply casts Oedipus aside, dismissing him with, "No more: here your power ends. None of your power follows you through life."[51] Gender significations are consistently revised, exaggerated, or inverted in this scene as a method of citation to highlight and critique the gender-normativizing aspects of Oedipus Rex that position it as an ancient Greek morality play aimed at ensuring the efficacy of a masculinist social project.

Conclusion

Faux-Real's *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* confounds socially constructed distinctions between man and woman. The apparent contradictions realized in the play's cross-gender representations convey gender as performative, thereby rendering explicit the implicit social configuration of attributes and behaviors that designate woman/man identity positions. The lead actors' performances contraposition male- and female-coded bodies against female- and male-coded costume, movement, vocal inflection, etc. The concurrent signs of man and woman trouble the notion that one is the "real" or "original" gender; neither one necessarily precedes the other.[52] The spectator's recognition of this dilemma arouses the notion that a rouged cheek, square jaw, voice lilting in emotional pain, muscular bicep—and, by extension, vagina, penis, breasts, etc.—perform social functions as objects to which are ascribed meanings that mark them as either masculine or feminine. In its contemporary context, the highly gendered corporeality of the performances calls into question the ontological status of gender.

Rather than utilizing only men in the roles of women to interrogate gender in ways that, ultimately, buttress androcentric power, *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* deconstructs the gender binary through the cross-gender performance of a woman and a man to suggest that gender itself is a means through which power circulates in ways that privilege or marginalize the very identities it is said to constitute. In its corporeality, *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* embodies Judith Butler's observation that "if gender attributes are not expressive but performative, then these attributes effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal."[53] The stylized portrayals of Oedipus by a woman and Jocasta by a man work synergistically to avoid effacement of the woman in drag.

To the contrary, the production foregrounds a concern with re-visioning the roles and functions of women in ancient Greek tragedy to deconstruct traditional notions of Woman and Man. *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* demonstrates that new productions of Greek tragedy can examine and contest hegemonic constructions of gender to revivify classical theatre for contemporary audiences.

Notes

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1 The author acknowledges his participation in The Faux-Real Theatre Company, as a member of is Artistic Board and Chorus actor in the 2013 production of *Oedipus Rex XX/XY*, for which he recieves no financial compensation.

2 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990). It is worth noting that Anne Carson variously cast Judith Butler as Creon and Lou Reed as Antigone in staged readings of *Antigonick* presented in 2013.

3 Judith Butler, "From Interiority to Gender Performatives," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Perfoming Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 366.

4 Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 9.

5 Ibid., 8.

6 Nancy Sorkin Rabinowtiz, "The Male Actor of Greek Tragedy: Evidence of Mosogyny or Gender-Bending?" *Didaskalia* 1, no. 6 (1994): par. 11, https://www.didaskalia.net/issues/supplement1/rabinowitz.html (accessed 15 February 2018).

7 In postulating this dual concept of the reception of theatre in ancient Greece, Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz (see "The Male Actor of Greek Tragedy," 1994) draws upon Peter J. Rabinowitz's notion of the *narrative* and *authorial* levels of theatrical reception. At the narrative leevel, the auidence takes the drama as a reality unfolding in real time upon the stage. At the authorial level, the audience retains an awareness that the drama is an author's formulated construction. Peter J. Rabinowitz, *Before Reading: Narrative Conventions and the Politics of Interpretation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

8 Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992/2011), 8.

9 Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discurives Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993/2014), 125.

10 All production descriptions cite the performance of *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* on 23 March 2013 at La MaMa, New York City. The creative team was as follows: DirectorL Mark Greenfield; Assisstant Director: Alessandra DeMeo; Dramaturge: Aaron Poochigan; Musical Director: Tony Naumovski; Mask Designer and Scenic Artist: Lynda White; Costume Designer: Irina Gets; Set Artists: Michael Casselli and John Milano: Lighting Designer: Kobin Kaluza; Stage Manager: Abbey Bay; Production Assistant: Emma Orme; Musicians: Jim Galbraith, Allison Linker, Michael Mitchell, Sean Mullins, Tom Ritchford, Jeff Wood, and Mari Yamamoto. The case was as follows: Oedipus: Stephanie Regina; Jocasta: Tony Naumovski; Creon: Jy Murphy; Tiresias: Jason Scott Quinn; Chorus: Justin Dobies, Gökçen Gökçebag, Matt Ketai, Alex Kryger, Ara Morton, Aidan Nelson, Alejandro Santoni, Dorian Shorts, Manuel Simons, and Derek Robert Smith.

11 Susan Leigh Foster, "Choreographies of Gender," in *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, Volume IV, ed. Philip Auslander (New York: Routledge, 2003/2005), 133.

12 All images of the Faux-Real Theatre Company's production of *Oedipus Rex XX/XY* appearing in this article are copyright Peter James Zielinski for kindly permitting the use of these photos.

13 Kate Davy, "Fe/male Impersonation: The Discourse of Camp," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 357-8.

14 José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

15 Ibid., Muñoz further explains that "a 'disidentificatory subject' tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form." Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

16 See Blundell 1995 for a discussion that encompasses various meanigs of oikos dependent upon context and a description of its functions relative to ancient Greek marriage and inheritance law.

17 Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 114.

18 Francisco Valdes, "Unpacking Hetero-Patriarchy: Tracing the Conflation of Sex, Gender & Sexual Orientation to Its Origins," *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 8, no. 1 (1996): 179

19 Ibid., 178.

20 Froma I. Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1996), 364. Zeitlin argues that Athenian drama achieves this by "energizing the theatrical resources of the female an dconcomitantly enervating the male as teh price of initiating actor and spectator into new and unsettling modes of feeling, seeing, and knowing."

21 Ibid.

22 See Zeitlin 1996 for an acutely observed and detailed treatment of the role of the feminine in Greek drama.

23 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* in *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Group, 1984), 195.

24 See, for example, the National Football League's video of Lady Gaga's 2017 Super Bowl performace. NFL, "Lady Gag's Pepsi Zero Sugar SuperBowl LI Halftime Show," 13:33, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=txXwg712zw4 (accessed 15 February 2018).

25 See, for example, Madonna's *Like a Virgin* music video. Madonna, "Madonna Videos," *Like a Virgin* video, 3:46, directed by Mary Lambert, 1984, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHW5RVvg2v4 (accessed 21 August 2017).

26 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* in *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Group, 1984), 196.

27 See Ormand, "Oedpius the Queen," 2003.

28 Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, 346.

29 Kirk Ormand, "Oedipus the Queen: Cross-gendering without Drag," *Theatre Journal* 55, no. 1 (March 2003): 28.

30 Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 125.

31 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* in *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Group, 1984), 183, 185.

32 Ibid., 244.

33 Ibid., 236.

34 Sue-Ellen Case, Feminism and Theatre (New York: Methuen, 1988).

35 For another discussion of the representation of Woman/woman in Oedipus Rex XX/XY, which quotes an earlier version of this paper, see Melinda Powers' Diversfying Greek Tragedy on the Contemporary US Stage (Oxford: Oxford Univeristy Press, 2018).

36 Sophocles, Oedipus the King in Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays, trans. Robert fagles (New York: Penguin Group, 1984), 222.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Richard Schechner, *Public Domain* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), 118.

40 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* as quoted in Kirk Ormand, "Oedipus the Queen: Cross-gendering without Drag,"*Theater Journal* 55, no. 1 (March 2003): 2.

41 Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 25. Roach develops his concepts of surrogation relevant to teh circum-Atlantic world's process of cultural reproduction and re-creation. Surrogates "stand in" for persons under erasure: the dead and those made invisible via other forms of dissolutions. David Lambert writes: "Surrogation is a key mechanism for the repoduction of collective social memory….Yet, surrogation is rarely successful in exactly replacing loss because substitutes invariably fail to meet—or even exceed—expectations." Lambert, "Part of the blood and dream': Surrogation, Memory and teh National Hero in the Postcolonial Caribeean," *Patterns of Prejudice* 41, no. 3-4 (2007): 345.

42 Both gender and class are implicated as Oedipus is no longer King, but now, like women and slaves, is reduced to less than full citizenship.

43 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* in *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Group, 1984), 237.

44 Ibid.

45 For information on the revalence of suicide among transgender and gender non-conforming pupulations, see Ann P. Haas, Philip L. Rodgers, and Jody L. Herman's article "Suicide attempts among transgender and gender non-conforming adults," *UCLA: The Williams Institute* (2014), https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8xg8061f (accessed 1 August 2018).
46 *Los Angeles TImes*, "Transgender teen who spoke on Youtube of bullying takes her own life," 9 April 2015, http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-transgender-teen-suicide-20150409-story.html (accessed 21 August 2017); *Times of India*, "Transgender ends life as mother refuses to accept him," 20 May 2013, http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/coimbatore/Transgender-ends-life-as-mother-refuses-to-accept-him/articleshow/20155648.cms? (accessed 21 August 2017).
47 Sophocles' *Ajax* represents one of teh most often cited exceptions. However, see Ormand 2003, in which the author argues that suicide, although enacted by a man, is rendered as a feminine act in *Ajax*.
48 *Boys Don't Cry*, directed by Kimberly Peirce, produced by Fox Killer Films, distributed by Searchlight Pictures (1999), http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0171804/?ref_=ttco_co_tt (accessed 21 August 2017).
49 Ormand, "Oedipus the Queen," 1-28.
50 Ibid.
51 Sophocles, *Oedipus the King* in *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Group, 1984), 250.
52 See Butler 1990 for a discussion of the "real" as an effect, as opposed to a cause, of gender.
53 Judith Butler, "From Interiority to Gender Performatives," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: Univeristy of Michigan Press, 2002), 366.

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