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Rain Inside the Elevator:

Dualities in the Plays of Sarah Ruhl As Seen Through the Lens of Ancient Greek Theatre

Hannah Fattor

Advisor: Prof. Sara Freeman

Crowded together in enormous amphitheatres during the fifth century BCE and in tight little black box theatres now, audiences come to experience a play. A thread of connection runs through theatrical tradition, dating back to the Greek stories that are still retold and reworked today for contemporary audiences but remain a part of mythic tradition. The ancient Greek playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes wrote about the moments of suffering and moments of joy that are part of being human, and Sarah Ruhl writes about them now. Ruhl's first published play, *Eurydice*, has the most obvious connection to Greek legend, taking its main characters from the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Considering the rest of her works through this paradigm illuminates many more links to ancient Greek theatre and highlights both the depth of the emotions within her plays and the power of her characters and themes. Despite the differences of time, place, and even the gender of the playwright, Ruhl and the Greeks confront themes of love and death with both sorrow and humor, considering the different ways people cope with traumatic circumstances.

Ruhl's work recognizes and utilizes the versatility and beauty of language while working in the framework of fragmented, genre-combining postmodernism. Her plays lack the emphasis on spirituality present in the ancient Greek plays but, like the Greek playwrights, she addresses the issue of an afterlife and, more importantly, of how people cope with the death of a loved one. All of the playwrights considered in this study stress the importance of connection, collapsing the boundaries between life and death, happiness and sadness, male and female, gods and humans. Ruhl deals with a theatrical aesthetic far more fluid than that of the Greeks and indicates staging and directing approaches within her texts, as in *Eurydice* when she asks for rain within an elevator and "*sounds of vertigo./Sounds of breathing,*" but the imagery she employs

and the intersection of oppositions apparent in her plots, themes, and stage pictures reveals how closely she echoes the Greek playwrights as she examines human beings dealing with loss and with love.¹

Ruhl lost her father to cancer when she was in her early twenties and this painful experience colors much of her writing. Her earliest works deal with the death of a loved one, albeit in very different ways, and all of her plays contain at least the presence of death.²

Melancholy Play, *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, and *Eurydice* all discuss different ways of coping with loss, but a common concept runs through all of them; it helps to come together in grief. This is an idea that the Greek tragedians shared, as evidenced by Euripides' *The Women of Troy*, Sophocles' *Antigone*, and Euripides' *Medea*. Ruhl follows a tradition of theatre established by the Greek playwrights, exploring the deeply human themes of grief and mourning in a community and examining the paradoxical situation where experiencing a loss can bring people closer together.

Ruhl's "contemporary farce," *Melancholy Play*, deals with an exaggerated, directionless depression that brings the characters together in a ritual celebration of sadness reminiscent of a Greek tragic chorus such as the mourning women in Euripides' *The Women of Troy*.³ The protagonist, Tilly, is alluring in her melancholy, as Ruhl insists in her notes on the tone of the play that "Melancholy in this play is Bold, Outward, Sassy, Sexy, and Unashamed. [...]"⁴ However, be sensitive to the moments of delicacy, fragility, and sadness inside of the farce."⁴

¹ Sarah Ruhl, "Eurydice," in *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theater Communications, 2006), 356.

² James Al-Shamma, *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co, Inc, 2011), 8.

³ Sarah Ruhl, "Melancholy Play: a contemporary farce," in *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theater Communications, 2006), 221.

⁴ Ruhl, *Melancholy*, 229.

The capitalization of each adjective creates distinct emphasis for every word, none of which are instinctively associated with melancholy. Still, while Ruhl asks the director to honor this unnatural portrayal of melancholy, she does wish to preserve the underlying current of sadness that is suggested by the title of *Melancholy Play*. Despite the fact that it inspires desire in all the characters, melancholy also has dire consequences, as James Al-Shamma elaborates in *Sarah Ruhl: A Critical Study of the Plays*, one of the few critical sources on Ruhl's work to date. Al-Shamma notes that "melancholy is a cause of death. The characters catch the condition from Tilly one at a time and, as it runs its course, it ultimately terminates in the almond state (a metaphor for death) for all of them."⁵ This "almond state" does not solely represent death, however, but also suggests a state of depression that is inescapable. The fact that Ruhl uses the whimsically named "almond state" removes the sorrow and grief that the words "death" or "depression" connote. The solitude that is also associated with both death and depression is broken as every character catches this plague of melancholy and turns into an almond. Tilly insists that "We don't care if we're almonds. The important thing is that we're together."⁶ The play ends with them dancing in pairs, in love and part of a community. As a group, they have found a communal, ceremonial joy in melancholy.

The same joy is not apparent in *The Women of Troy*, but Euripides does express how connecting in a communal sorrow is necessary to human beings. The conquered Hecabe asks that "widowed brides of Trojan fighting-men,/Weeping mothers, trembling daughters,/Come, weep with me while the smoke goes up from Troy!"⁷ Half of the chorus enters to mourn with

⁵ Al-Shamma, 74-75.

⁶ Ruhl, *Melancholy*, 324.

⁷ Euripides, "The Women of Troy," in *The Bacchae and Other Plays*, 2nd ed., translated by Philip Vellacott. (New York: Penguin, 1973), 94.

Hecabe, which is unusual in Greek tragedy. The chorus typically acts as a cohesive unit, entering and dancing together, occasionally fading to the background so the main actors can have a moment together but not usually leaving the stage.⁸ In this case, Euripides splits the chorus of Trojan women into those who come to grieve with Hecabe and a group which enters a few lines later to ask what their fate may be.⁹ However, the division of the chorus — between those who simply mourn and those who have questions and fear — falls away after this query, and as a community they recite their losses and their concerns while Hecabe listens.¹⁰ Their suffering brings them together, just like the characters in *Melancholy Play*, which also ends with a song and dance reminiscent of the Greek choral odes.

Choral songs mark spaces between acts, serve to break up the play's dialogue, and also reflect the origins of Greek tragedy.¹¹ Plays emerged from the dithyrambs that followers of Dionysus sang to honor the god of wine and revelry.¹² The themes of these dithyrambs changed over time to include a wide variety of heroic sagas, including the stories of Hercules, Prometheus, and Jason.¹³ The leaders of the dithyramb were called the *exarchontes* and, according to Aristotle, it was these individuals who inspired the birth of tragedies. The heroic saga required one member of the satyr chorus of the dithyramb to be dressed as the hero, whether it be Hercules or Jason.¹⁴ The chorus' role was originally ceremonial, and that element of

⁸ Oliver Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1977), 375.

⁹ Euripides, *Women*, 95.

¹⁰ Euripides, *Women*, 96.

¹¹ Taplin, *Stagecraft*, 55.

¹² Margarete Bieber, *The History of the Greek and Roman Theatre* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1961), 1.

¹³ Bieber, 6.

¹⁴ Bieber, 15.

ceremony remained even after tragedy separated itself from its religious roots. The importance of this ceremony appears in *Melancholy Play*, with a communal drinking of mournful libations and an ending song and dance.¹⁵ The chorus of Trojan women gathers in lamentation with Hecabe, while the cast of *Melancholy Play* gathers to join in Tilly's melancholy. This desire for community emphasizes how relating to one another during trying times is a human need. Experiencing painful circumstances leads to a desire to connect and find commiserators.

While death separates people in Ruhl's *Dead Man's Cell Phone*, it also brings people together in love, echoing the relationships in Sophocles' *Antigone*, though Ruhl's lovers come to a happier end. Jean sees Gordon, a stranger, die, and because she never has the chance to meet him, she "fabricates stories about the deceased Gordon that recast him in a better light; in doing so, she constructs a fulfilled image of him for the benefit of his family and loved ones."¹⁶ She falls in love with this image of Gordon and joins him in his personal afterlife "for people who sell organs on the black market and the people who loved them," though it is in this afterlife that her illusions about Gordon dissolve.¹⁷ She recognizes his cruelty and unrepentant attitude towards his job as well as his arrogance in discovering she loves him, and so she chooses to return to the land of the living to be with Gordon's brother, Dwight. After this scene of realization, Al-Shamma points out that "the plot accelerates and the play becomes farcical," removing any remaining weight that the subject of death may have leant to the play and instead speeding up the process of finding the one person that each character truly loves.¹⁸ The suicide

¹⁵ Ruhl, *Melancholy*, 324.

¹⁶ Al-Shamma, 84.

¹⁷ Sarah Ruhl, *Dead Man's Cell Phone* (New York: Theater Communications, 2008), 80.

¹⁸ Al-Shamma, 97.

of Gordon's mother, Mrs. Gottlieb, is surprising and humorous instead of tragic as she self-immolates on her own barbecue pit, an action which occurs offstage in true Greek style.¹⁹ Her son Dwight is philosophical about his mother's choice, realizing that his mother and brother will be together in the afterlife because "When you die, you go straight to the person you most loved, right back to the very moment, the very place, you decided you loved them"²⁰ and Dwight explains that "She always did love him best."²¹ Jean insists that she and Dwight love each other in such a way that they will not be separated after death, and the play ends with their kiss.²² The suddenness of these events, all of which occur within the final scene, shifts the focus from death to love. Just as death can bring a community together in mourning, it can also bring two people together in love and help them find a way to live their lives and find happiness.

Ruhl handles this concept with greater optimism than Sophocles in *Antigone*, where characters can only be with the ones they love after death, not in life. Antigone chooses to bury her brother Polynices "even if I die in the act" for "I have longer/to please the dead than please the living here:/in the kingdom down below I'll lie forever."²³ In the first hundred lines of this play, Sophocles establishes a focus on the afterlife rather than tangible reality by revealing Antigone's early preoccupation with her own death, "the kingdom down below," and dealing with the dead rather than the living. Creon orders her to "Go down below and love/if love you

¹⁹ Ruhl, *Dead*, 97.

²⁰ Ruhl, *Dead*, 81.

²¹ Ruhl, *Dead*, 97.

²² Ruhl, *Dead*, 99.

²³ Sophocles, "Antigone" in *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus*, translated by Bernard Knox (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Classics, 1983), 86-90.

must—love the dead!” and Antigone takes him at his word.²⁴ Creon’s son Haemon, who was betrothed to Antigone, kills himself to be with her, and the Messenger tells the chorus that “he has won his bride at last, poor boy,/not here but in the houses of the dead.”²⁵ Love can only be found after death in *Antigone*, while death leads to love in *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*. Though love is considered the province of the living, the mark of a full life and not connected with death, Ruhl and Sophocles both explore how love and death are intertwined in ways that can lead to deep connection rather than deep sorrow. Ruhl emphasizes love while Sophocles dwells on death, but both playwrights recognize that there is a possibility for finding love after death. Ruhl’s play *Eurydice* delves deeper into the power of love after death, but those characters do not meet with the same success that the cast of *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* experiences. *Eurydice* deals with the way love fails in the face of death and memory loss, while both *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* and *Antigone* express how love conquers death. Gordon will be with his mother, Jane will be with Dwight, Antigone will have Polynices, and Haemon will finally have his bride. Together, these characters form beautiful connections amidst grief, and that love does not fade. They will never suffer alone, and that is a source for joy.

Ruhl cautions against solitary mourning in *Eurydice*, where, as in Euripides’ *Medea*, a lack of human connection leads to a loss of humanity. Eurydice speaks to the audience and the chorus of Three Stones about her arrival in the underworld, when she was dipped in the river of forgetfulness and was “alone with myself/begging myself not to leave my own body [...] How do you say goodbye to yourself?”²⁶ Ruhl equates Eurydice’s loss of memories with her loss of

²⁴ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 591-2.

²⁵ Sophocles, *Antigone*, 1370-1.

²⁶ Ruhl, *Eurydice*, 361.

self. She does not recall her own father when he greets her, and the stones explain that “Father is not a word that dead people understand.”²⁷ Without parents, memories, or human bonds, the dead cannot understand the living, and thus they lose their humanity. Al-Shamma interprets the representation of life and death in this play “as a continuum, along which Orpheus represents the living, Eurydice the newly-dead, her father the recently dead, and the Stones, the contented and long-dead.”²⁸ The Stones’ distance from humanity is displayed in their lack of individuality; they speak in unison, finish each others sentences, and dully recite the rules of this afterlife where fathers do not exist and “[b]eing sad is not allowed!”²⁹ Eurydice clings to humanity with the help of her father, who slowly rebuilds her knowledge of herself and the world of the living, but when he dips himself in the river and abandons her, she loses her last link to other human beings. She writes a final letter to Orpheus and then Ruhl describes how “*She dips herself in the River./A small metallic sound of forgetfulness—ping*” as she surrenders her identity.³⁰ The loss of memory takes the humanity from all three characters, the Father, Eurydice, and Orpheus, and the play ends with silence and isolation rather than connection.³¹ The characters can no longer relate to each other and will become like the Stones who forgot themselves and their humanity long ago. Ruhl warns against forgetting each other, even to escape grief, because forgetting the people that make up one’s past can lead to a loss of self.

Euripides also provides a cautionary tale in *Medea*, where the eponymous heroine loses her humanity as she vengefully destroys all of her human relationships. Abandoned by her

²⁷ Ruhl, *Eurydice*, 363.

²⁸ Al-Shamma, 28.

²⁹ Ruhl, *Eurydice*, 373.

³⁰ Ruhl, *Eurydice*, 411.

³¹ Ruhl, *Eurydice*, 411.

husband, Jason, for another woman, she kills her sons and denies any former connection to either of them, declaring, “Forget you love your sons.[...]Today, remember nothing./Tomorrow, mourn them.”³² She is single-minded in her quest for vengeance, her grief suppressed until “tomorrow.” Medea reappears after killing her sons “*in a chariot drawn by dragons*” according to the stage directions from translators Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer.³³ Stage directions were not included in the original Greek playtexts because the playwrights also served as the directors, choreographers, costumers, scene designers, and prop-masters, so they would not have any need to include stage directions in something they would be working on themselves.³⁴ In this case, the stage directions are supported by the text, wherein Medea explains that “Helios has sent his chariot to keep me from my enemies.”³⁵ This chariot would have appeared above the stage, in position atop the *skene*, a stage-building that often represented a palace or temple within the context of the play as well as serving as a changing place for the actors.³⁶ The *skene* also offered an opportunity for differentiation between the human and the divine.³⁷ This higher platform was the realm of the gods and the source for divine epiphanies, called *deus ex machinae*, which were a primary feature of Euripides.³⁸ Euripides’ choice to place Medea on the *skene*, in a position that gods take in other plays, reflects her distance from the human realm. The same differentiation between worlds appears in *Eurydice* in the form of the elevator, which connects

³² Euripides, *Medea*, translated by Michael Collier and Georgia Machemer (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), 1220-3.

³³ Euripides, *Medea*, 1291-2.

³⁴ Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978), 2.

³⁵ Euripides, *Medea*, 1296.

³⁶ Taplin, *Stagecraft*, 452.

³⁷ Taplin, *Stagecraft*, 440.

³⁸ Beiber, 30.

the upper land of the living with the underground world of the dead.³⁹ The loss of memory that occurs in this transitional space, where the rain inside the elevator erases the memories of the newly-dead passengers, is the first step that separates Eurydice from her previous life and her humanity. On a similarly separate plane, high above the earthly realm, Medea gains a kind of divinity as she loses her own humanity. She suffers and, “tomorrow,” she will mourn alone, but in her last appearance onstage she refuses to allow Jason to say goodbye to their dead sons and spirits them away with her instead, abandoning the man she once loved without a farewell.⁴⁰ Through her desire for vengeance and rejection of all relationships, Medea is transfigured. She becomes like the Greek gods who do not forgive and forget, do not tolerate scorn, and do not show mercy when they are wronged.

The godlike qualities of Medea are reflected in Dionysus, though he is one of the more unpredictable Greek gods. Theatre arose from the cult of Dionysus and his ambiguities color the creation of theatre. He is ever-changing, his identity inconsistent and his actions unpredictable, and the Greeks viewed him “as the embodiment of contradictory tendencies, a fundamental paradox inherent in the world, life-giving but potentially destructive.”⁴¹ It is this dichotomy of life and death, and how to continue to live when the world seems dark and confused, that drives the plots of Ruhl’s plays and creates the tragedy and the comedy of the Greeks. In order to emphasize this desire for connection, both Ruhl and the Greeks examine the opposites of tragedy and comedy, male and female dynamics, and the divine and the human in order to communicate the interrelationship that exists between these apparent contrasts.

³⁹ Ruhl, *Eurydice*, 359.

⁴⁰ Euripides, *Medea*, 1391-2.

⁴¹ Rush Rehm, *Greek Tragic Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 13.

While all of Ruhl's plays contain moments of comedy alongside drama, *The Clean House* in particular finds a balance between the persistence of grief and its release to express how, while mourning is necessary to overcoming a great loss, life must go on. The Greeks have a clear delineation between tragic circumstances and comedic ones: in tragedy, a small group of characters suffers either alone or as a community, while comedy offers grand and strange solutions to a social or political problem. Ruhl breaks down the division between tragedy and comedy in a reflection of real life's tangled emotions and circumstances. Ruhl explores death and jokes throughout *The Clean House*, twining the two together in the cleaning woman Matilde's description of her parents's death; Matilde's father accidentally kills Matilde's mother with the funniest joke in the world, then shoots himself in his grief.⁴² Though they die a year before the events of the play, Ruhl notes in Matilde's character description that "She wears black," still mourning her family, and Matilde's parents appear onstage as ghosts, their love preserved in Matilde's mind and clearly displayed to the audience.⁴³ The characters of her father and mother are portrayed by the same actors who play Ana and Charles, two people with an instant love connection despite the fact that Charles is married to Matilde's employer, Lane. This technique of double casting helps the audience understand the sudden, deep bond between Ana and Charles, and explains why Matilde goes to live with them as a surrogate daughter.⁴⁴ It also displays the ways in which Ana and Charles suffer a fate similar to that of Matilde's actual parents, for, though "Both men have good intentions, [they] bungle the result," Matilde's father killing Matilde's mother with a joke and Charles abandoning Ana during her illness to try and

⁴² Sarah Ruhl, "The Clean House," in *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theater Communications, 2006), 11.

⁴³ Ruhl, *Clean*, 7.

⁴⁴ Al-Shamma, 51-52.

find a cure for her cancer.⁴⁵ The mirroring of the couples, more importantly, demonstrates the ways in which Ana and Charles' suffering differs from that of Matilde's parents. Matilde "symbolically rectifies her mother's murder as an act of mercy rather than an accident" as she helps a deathly ill Ana die with dignity by telling her the funniest joke in the world.⁴⁶ Humor does kill, but it also provides comfort, and it can help heal pain and grief. Ruhl demonstrates how Matilde has begun this process of healing in the final scene. Charles and Ana "shed a layer of costuming" and transform into Matilde's parents, which "enables Ana's death to flow into Matilde's birth scene," Matilde's final soliloquy of the play.⁴⁷ Though there is a great deal of suffering when a loved one is lost, life goes on and new life can arise. Joy and sorrow are inexorably tied together in *The Clean House*; an actor in one production described how audience members would be laughing at something that other members were crying at, and the cast could never predict when there would be laughter.⁴⁸ Through the laughter and the tears, Ruhl describes a final look between Matilde and the ghosts of her parents that is "*A moment of completion between them.*"⁴⁹ From death to life, from laughter to tears to laughter again, there is a sense of peace when Matilde accepts her parents' death and begins the process of healing.

Life, death, comedy, and tragedy are all the province of Dionysus, and his portrayal in Euripides' tragicomic *Bacchae* reflects these intersections of his personality. Dionysus gives the initial prologue alone onstage, setting out his plans to "wage war on [Thebes], marshalling [his]

⁴⁵ Al-Shamma, 52.

⁴⁶ Al-Shamma, 39.

⁴⁷ Al-Shamma, 52.

⁴⁸ Al-Shamma, 42.

⁴⁹ Ruhl, *Clean*, 109.

army of maenads.”⁵⁰ He describes his female worshippers, foreign women who have accepted his status as a god and followed him from Asia to assist him in asserting his power in Greece. These women are ferocious, manic in their devotion to Dionysus, and yet they are still close to in strength to the group of women in Ruhl’s *The Clean House*. While Ana, Virginia, Lane, and Matilde gather together in quiet moments of ceremony, including eating “ice cream out of the same container”⁵¹ and performing burial rites for Ana after her death,⁵² the ceremonies of the maenads are held far from civilization, on a local mountain where they dress in animal skins, sacrifice to Dionysus, and dance ecstatically.⁵³ Still, the community of women in Ruhl’s play is no less passionate than the maenads of Euripides, who have followed Dionysus all the way from Asia, and Lane “guards [Ana] the way a dog would guard a rival dog, /if her rival were sick.”⁵⁴ Women have strength together, and while the women in *The Clean House* unite against solitude and suffering, the maenads unite to help their god. In a comic shift from the dramatic prologue and after the chorus of Asian maenads has further explained the deadly affair, the king of Thebes and the seer Tiresias appear, dressed like the female maenads.⁵⁵ They even speak of their plans to dance with the maenads who fled to the hills, Cadmus leading the blind Tiresias to “ply [their] feet” and “shake [their] grey heads.”⁵⁶ Tragedy turns comic as this juxtaposition of powerful maenads and these two old men in female clothing creates a humorous incongruity after such a

⁵⁰ Euripides, *Bacchae*, translated by Stephen J. Esposito (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 1998), 52.

⁵¹ Ruhl, *Clean*, 99.

⁵² Ruhl, *Clean*, 106-7.

⁵³ Rehm, 13.

⁵⁴ Ruhl, *Clean*, 103.

⁵⁵ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 170-179.

⁵⁶ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 184-5.

dramatic introduction. Conversely, there is also a sense of tragedy underlying comic moments, as when Dionysus, disguised as a stranger, convinces Pentheus to cross-dress in order to spy on the maenads in the hills.⁵⁷ This scene is quite silly, with a drunk Pentheus fussing over his clothes, but the audience recalls that Dionysus intends to “dress Pentheus up in the very adornments/he’ll wear to Hades after being slain by his mother’s hands.”⁵⁸ While Pentheus boasts of how lovely he looks as a woman, the stranger quietly interjects with ominous double meanings, speaking of how Pentheus “will catch [the maenads] perhaps unless you are caught first,”⁵⁹ and how Pentheus “will be *carried* home [...] in your mother’s arms,” alluding to the fact that his mother Agave will murder him and carry his head home as a trophy.⁶⁰ It is a dark dramatic irony, the audience aware that Pentheus unwittingly goes to his death while Pentheus can only drunkenly praise his own beauty and strength. The stranger continually alludes to Pentheus’ doom, recalling it for the audience to enhance the sense of inevitability. Tragedy undermines the comedy in this case. Euripides blends the two together well in *Bacchae*, and while Ruhl’s *The Clean House* ends more happily than this tragedy, it follows the same spirit of laughing over the fear of death. Dionysus is the god of wine and revelry, ruling over the delight and hedonism found in life, but he is not human. He is a god. He can tell jokes but the punchline is the suffering of human beings. Still, his role is not set and while he can be vicious, he often viciously undermines constrictive aspects of Greek culture, including ideas about women’s roles and sexuality.

⁵⁷ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 821-39.

⁵⁸ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 857-8.

⁵⁹ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 960.

⁶⁰ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 968-9.

Men and women find points of connection in Ruhl's *In The Next Room or the vibrator play* and find their societal roles reversed or collapsed in *Late*, as, despite their blatant differences in terms of values and positions in society, male and female roles are not so strictly delineated. *In The Next Room* follows a theatrical tradition of portraying empowered women in socially rigid times, echoing Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, but rather than fleeing an unfulfilling marriage, *In The Next Room*'s protagonist, Catherine, is able to connect with her husband romantically and sexually, their marriage saved by love. The staging of the play calls for action performed simultaneously in the separate rooms of the operating theatre, the realm of science and masculinity, and the living room, which is a place of social connection and the feminine.⁶¹ As the characters observe the structure of the stage and interact only within their spheres, Ruhl emphasizing how separate these worlds truly are. At the end of the play, however, when Catherine invites her husband to join her in the garden, Ruhl describes how “*Although the domestic space seemed terribly permanent [...] suddenly it disappears and we are in a sweet small winter garden.*”⁶² Realism gives way to the fantastic, magic, and romantic as strict boundaries blow apart in what Al-Shamma interprets as a dissolution of the “patriarchal structure of house and home.”⁶³ Ruhl has an optimistic, activist opinion about familial and social change which is reflected in her choice to collapse “the binaries associated with the dual structure of the house.”⁶⁴ As the husband and wife connect, the concrete worlds that kept them

⁶¹ Al-Shamma, 148.

⁶² Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room or the Vibrator Play* (New York: Theater Communications, 2010), 142.

⁶³ Al-Shamma, 141.

⁶⁴ Al-Shamma, 172.

separate collapse into a welcoming, “sweet” garden outside the boundaries of their house, where they can find love.

Aristophanes explores the connection between men and women in *Lysistrata* and *Assemblywomen*, albeit with more humor and less tenderness than Ruhl. In *Lysistrata*, while the women abstain from intercourse with their husbands in order to bring about peace, they have the same desire as their husbands. When Lysistrata first proposes the abstinence, though previously the women declared that they would do anything to have peace, one insists that she would “walk through fire; *that* rather than give up cock.”⁶⁵ This lust mirrors their husbands’ desires, which are made apparent throughout the play with the help of the comedic costume of a large, visible phallus attached to the actor’s clothing.⁶⁶ In the end, the Spartans and Athenians agree to make peace, overseen by a triumphant Lysistrata, and their desires are satisfied as they divide up Greece by choosing desirable locations on a girl who represents a map of their territory.⁶⁷ Men and women are mutually satisfied, though without the romance or deeper connection that Ruhl displays in her play. Such tender scenes would have been a rarity in an ancient Greek comedy, but such a connection appears present in *Assemblywomen*, which translator Jeffrey Henderson notes as “the first such ‘romantic’ relationship portrayed in surviving Greek drama.”⁶⁸ An unnamed girl and a man named Epigenes sing each other mutual love poetry, speaking of desire for each other in beautiful images as well as crass sexual terms that express their mutual desire.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Aristophanes, “Lysistrata” in *3 Plays by Aristophanes: Staging Women*, 2nd ed., translated by Jeffrey Henderson (New York: Routledge, 2010), 137.

⁶⁶ Bieber, 39.

⁶⁷ Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, 1180-1195.

⁶⁸ Jeffrey Henderson, *3 Plays by Aristophanes: Staging Women*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 243.

⁶⁹ Aristophanes, “Assemblywomen” in *3 Plays by Aristophanes: Staging Women*, 2nd ed., translated by Jeffrey Henderson (New York: Routledge, 2010), 990-1030.

Their speeches reflect a meeting of the heart and the body that Ruhl considers essential to a happy relationship. Its beauty is tempered with low humor but it still displays the possibility for connection between two lovers, beyond the enforced contract of a marriage or the necessity of procreation.

In *Late: a cowboy song*, Ruhl collapses the distinction between traditional male and female gender roles as well as male and female sex, demonstrating that there are more possibilities for love and connection than these binaries suggest. Crick is unemployed for much of the play while his wife Mary works, and Ruhl describes him as “Charming, fragile and childlike,” all descriptions which go against a traditionally masculine role.⁷⁰ This idealized masculine character is actually a projection that Ruhl describes in her notes on set design, the “image of the Marlboro Man” which “hovers in the distance, against blue light.”⁷¹ This vision of the quintessential American male hangs over the action of the play, but Crick’s high artistic sensibilities and preoccupation with the tangible exclude him from this image of the old American west; instead the Marlboro Man is more associated with Red, a female cowboy.⁷² Crick and Red do not fit their respective gender roles, and while Mary does fill the role of a housewife, she rebels against this restrictive stereotype. Mary chooses to take her daughter, Blue, to join Red, subverting the heteronormative family model that she previously followed with Crick.⁷³ Through Crick, Red, and Mary, Ruhl demonstrates that men and women do not always fit their traditional places in society, and that they can escape if they so choose. They

⁷⁰ Sarah Ruhl, “Late: a cowboy song,” in *The Clean House and Other Plays* (New York: Theater Communications, 2006), 121.

⁷¹ Ruhl, *Late*, 121.

⁷² Al-Shamma, 107.

⁷³ Al-Shamma, 155.

may never fit a stereotype at all, as the invisible Blue suggests with her ambiguous sex; the doctors who delivered her weren't sure if she was a boy or a girl, but surgically made her female soon after her birth.⁷⁴ Rather than emphasizing confusion associated with not fitting into established gender norms, "Ruhl advances Blue's androgyny as a state of creative opportunity."⁷⁵ There can be no expectations placed on Blue based on her sex; she has the freedom to choose male or female, if she has to choose at all. Male and female dualities come together in Blue as Ruhl explores the freedom that comes from the intersection between the male and the female, when one can live freely and love completely under an all-encompassing sky.

Such gender ambiguities are remarkably common in Greek comedies, as Aristophanes explores in *Frogs* and *Women at the Thesmophoria*, where male and female intersect, though without Ruhl's sensitivity in *Late*. In *Frogs*, Dionysus appears dressed in a silly outfit that his brother Herakles mocks, noting the contradiction of a "lionskin atop a yellow gown," which was the traditional dress of a woman, and "a war club with lady's boots."⁷⁶ In this play he tries to render his costume, a long saffron gown that resembled Greek female garb, more masculine; instead, he appears ridiculous. However, Dionysus' attempt to bring the male and female together does succeed in getting him to the underworld, which was the purpose of such an outfit. The combination of masculine and feminine does not foil his plans, but instead leads to success. His celebrations were likewise fraught with contradictions of masculine and feminine, as his maenads took on a fierce, warlike, male role. Female worshippers celebrated Dionysus by "leaving their homes and going to the mountains, activities associated with male hunters,

⁷⁴ Ruhl, *Late*, 163.

⁷⁵ Al-Shamma, 106.

⁷⁶ Aristophanes, *Frogs*, translated by Jeffrey Henderson (Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2008), 5-6.

[participating] in the kind of sexual role reversal found in other cults linked to Dionysus.”⁷⁷

Cross-dressing appears to highlight these intersections in Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmophoria*, where Euripides’ kinsman dresses as a woman but is quickly discovered as a man when he describes a series of female stereotypes that appalls the rest of the women.⁷⁸ The real women object to being described as promiscuous, scheming thieves, and some women in this play, such as the articulate and persuasive orator Mika, attempt to subvert this negative image of females.⁷⁹ While Aristophanes is, of course, humorously irreverent in his handling of gender roles, he does show that these stereotypes do not always hold true, and that it is wrong to persecute all women based on prejudices of sex.

The women in Aristophanes’ *Women at the Thesmophoria* playfully fight against stereotyping, but Clytemnestra of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* violently goes against the idealized image of a Greek housewife, instead embodying the fears men have towards powerful women. She plots to kill her husband, King Agamemnon, and in Aeschylus’ telling of the tale she performs the act alone rather than receiving help from her lover Aegisthus, telling the chorus without shame how she murdered her husband in his bath.⁸⁰ She constructs an argument to justify her actions and scholar Oliver Taplin observes, “Both Clytemnestra and the chorus start from absolute positions, and they move towards not so much compromise as insight.”⁸¹ She is persuasive in her arguments for why her murder of Agamemnon was justified, and it is only the

⁷⁷ Rehm, 13.

⁷⁸ Aristophanes, “Women at the Thesmophoria” in *3 Plays by Aristophanes: Staging Women*, 2nd ed., translated by Jeffrey Henderson (New York: Routledge, 2010), 469-529.

⁷⁹ Aristophanes, *Thesmophoria*, 403-450.

⁸⁰ Aristophanes, *Thesmophoria*, 403-450.

⁸¹ Taplin, *Stagecraft*, 327.

sudden intrusion of Aegisthus that “not only breaks the movement towards insight [...], it also gives dramatic stress to the role played in the murder by the male, and hence, more importantly, by Clytemnestra.”⁸² Clytemnestra holds all the power in the play, from her meeting with Agamemnon where she denies him entry until he agrees to come in on her terms, to the murder she commits alone. She is similar to Red from *Late*, her power coming from within rather than a connection to any of the men in her life. Clytemnestra understands how to exert control, forcing her husband to act and react based on her own terms, just as Red is able to manipulate horses.⁸³ Crick fears Red and the power that she has, and how much that power and autonomy appeals to his wife Mary. Clytemnestra’s strength is further emphasized by the unusual ending to *Agamemnon*, where she speaks the last lines and the chorus leaves in silence. Taplin notes that “The final exit of a chorus, if it was managed in the usual way, would take time [...] The silent departure at the end of [*Agamemnon*] was surely meant to be unusual, and to be noticed.”⁸⁴ This sets the ominous mood for the deadly *Libation Bearers*, but it also emphasizes the strength of Clytemnestra’s optimism as she gets the last word about how her future will proceed. She truly believes that all will be well. She is a powerful woman with a plan that has succeeded perfectly, her quest for power and autonomy complete as she conquers her husband and takes his kingdom.

Divinity and humanity come together in Ruhl's *Passion Play*, with near-mythic political figures appearing onstage in a manner reminiscent of epiphanies in many Greek plays, including Euripides' *Bacchae*, intersecting and intermingling with more common characters in a way that demonstrates how neither divine nor human is necessarily superior to the other. In the three acts

⁸² Taplin, *Stagecraft*, 329.

⁸³ Ruhl, *Late*, 180.

⁸⁴ Taplin, *Stagecraft*, 331.

of *Passion Play*, Ruhl examines time periods dominated by leaders who “effectively utilized theater in the political arena.”⁸⁵ These leaders—Queen Elizabeth, Hitler, and Ronald Reagan—take on a mythic, god-like quality in their interactions with the audience and with characters onstage. The common characters of *Passion Play* are putting on an actual Passion Play, a theatrical depiction of Christ’s life and death, but despite their hard work and the sanctity of the production they were working on, they are still at the mercy of their rulers. The rulers are capable of stopping the Passion Play, as Queen Elizabeth does; of corrupting the message of the play, as Hitler does; and of completely ignoring the point of the play, as Ronald Reagan does. The most influential story in Christianity can change with the interpretation of the current political figure, and though the leader may change, the power of leadership continues. Having the same actor play each of these three leaders communicates this continuity of leadership, with the characters in the play obeying a person in power in spite of personal doubts. The audience recognizes these political figures, centuries or decades after their reign, as their legacy of control takes on a legendary status. These powerful historical leaders display the intersection of performance, politics, and religion.⁸⁶ Characters in the play are influenced by their leaders, even as these leaders are dependent on their subjects for their power. These leaders all know that they must perform for their people, and they know the importance of appearance. Queen Elizabeth describes the thick layer of makeup on her face that she wears “so that Queens do not appear to become old and ugly,”⁸⁷ while Hitler notes that “the people, they fell in love with my voice, but

⁸⁵ Al-Shamma, 112.

⁸⁶ Al-Shamma, 133.

⁸⁷ Sarah Ruhl, *Passion Play* (New York: Samuel French Inc, 2011), 53.

the women, they fell in love with my eyes”⁸⁸ and Reagan believes that even after he is dead “my cheeks will be rosy still.”⁸⁹ Youth and beauty are what these leaders need in order to preserve power; they cannot age or become ugly, but must appear to be unchanging gods. Their power is unquestionable and absolute only so long as they reveal no weakness.

The gods in Greek dramas show no weaknesses either, and it is this inhumanity that renders them both terrifying and oddly disconnected from reality. In Euripides’ *Bacchae*, Dionysus must prove his status as a god to the city of Thebes, but his attitude and tactics, while effectively displaying his divinity, lack an understanding of humanity. The messenger who describes Pentheus’ death consistently notes the god’s hand in the slaughter, describing how Pentheus’ mother Agave was “not thinking what she ought to think,/was held fast by the Bacchic god” as she “tore off his shoulder, not by her own strength—/no, the god gave a special ease to her hands.”⁹⁰ Though Agave performs the act, it is Dionysus who drives her to it and who lends her the power to murder her son with her bare hands. Yet, after Agave realizes what she has done and is horrified at her madness, Dionysus appears and places all the blame on her, declaring how “in your madness, Agave, you planned these things” and condemning her, “as a doer of the most impious murder,” to exile from Thebes.⁹¹ Though it was he who caused her madness, Dionysus takes no responsibility for his actions. He is inhuman and unforgiving, punishing even King Cadmus who accepted him as a god but was unable to persuade his grandson Pentheus to accept Dionysus.⁹² Cadmus admonishes Dionysus, saying, “Gods must not be like mortals in their

⁸⁸ Ruhl, *Passion*, 92.

⁸⁹ Ruhl, *Passion* 149.

⁹⁰ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 1123-8.

⁹¹ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 1330.

⁹² Euripides, *Bacchae*, 1330-5.

passions,” a statement Dionysus ignores but which draws intriguing connections between gods and humans.⁹³ Gods have inhuman power, and their responsibilities and sense of control should be stronger because of it; yet the Greek gods are far from controlled, but instead fall victim to the same petty jealousies and desires of the humans who worship them. Ruhl’s political leaders in *Passion Play* have similar flaws, imposing their personal views on the people they rule even when these views are informed by a personal bias rather than a concern for their subjects’ well-being. Still, the interrelationship between humans and gods (or the godlike, mythic leaders of Ruhl’s *Passion Play*) is a delicate balancing act. Though the powerful act above the laws of human beings, influencing the beliefs of the people as in *Passion Play* or transcending punishment as Dionysus does in *Bacchae*, a connection emerges between those with power and the ones that they control. *Passion Play*’s leaders need public respect and Dionysus seeks followers, and this give and take forges an interrelationship between the strong individuals and a weak mob. Both groups must coexist and acknowledge each other. It is difficult to maintain an equilibrium between such different classes as the powerfully divine and the human, but both are necessary for a harmonious existence.

Ruhl and the Greeks ultimately seek a harmony between contrasts in their plays. This quest for connection is particularly apparent in Ruhl’s *Eurydice*, where the characters attempt to forge a relationship between the dead and the living. Ruhl stresses language’s role in constructing a community. As a playwright, Ruhl’s works are meant to be performed before an audience, language binding humanity together in one space with one story. This powerful ritual action dates back to the vocal and physical performances of the Greeks, who likewise

⁹³ Euripides, *Bacchae*, 1348.

emphasized theatre's communal aspect. By theatrically exploring the themes of grief, mourning, love, and death through dualities such as tragedy versus comedy, male versus female dynamics, and divinity versus humanity, Ruhl and the Greeks are able to compare aspects of the world and show the vital interrelationship that exists between what appear to be contrasts. There are many more dichotomies found both in reality and in the plays of Ruhl and the Greeks, but the playwrights place no value judgements on such contradictions. Instead, they emphasize the strength of the connections formed between opposites, reminding their audiences of how important it is to seek relationships with each other and the world we live in.

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