An Interview with Catherine Theis

written by James Pate | July 13, 2017

When reading Catherine Theis' poetry, I'm frequently reminded of Godard's 1963 film *Contempt*. As with that movie, Theis is interested in the way in which the classical Greco-Roman world (its mythos, its philosophies) haunts contemporary times, but in a manner that is never sentimental or reactionary. Theis' work is often poised between the lure of the Great Noon and the lure of a moonless, starless night – ecstasy, despair, and odd mixtures in between. I recently spoke with Theis about her new book *MEDEA* (Plays Inverse Press).

James Pate: *Something that has always struck me about your writing – and this would be true for your first book, The Fraud of Good Sleep (Salt Publishing), as well as MEDEA – is the way you draw from classical literature, but never in a manner that seems nostalgic or backwards looking. Rather, it seems, to me at least, that you extract various images and themes from that literature for your own very modern ends. It's as if you use the present to de-familiarize the classical, and the classical to de-familiarize the present, creating this intriguing time-out-of-joint element.*

What draws you to classical literature? And more specifically, why did you choose to re-imagine Medea as opposed to other classical works?

Catherine Theis: Funny that you should mention "time-out-of-joint" because I'm forever thinking about setting things just right. (See Hamlet.) But only after I've broken them. You could say I'm more interested in disruption than in cure. In fact, the title of my latest manuscript is called *The Living Joints*. The word *joint*, as you know, is incredibly rich: a place where two bones come together, a meeting place, a prison, a creative piece of work, a break, a fracture, a hinge. I'm always trying to join things together that don't usually go together. My main mode in life is constantly contrary, a connective band of provocative vellum. Pounded parchment from skin, broken bones, living poems. I like the violence of living. There's an implied re-setting at the moment of composition. I know this sound pretentious, but I can't help describe my baby Frankensteins.

I'm drawn to classical literature because of my temperament and my parents, really. I grew up with a Sicilian mother and a German-American father. My father was educated by Jesuits, and so I was encouraged to take Latin in high school and learn about Ignatius and Western philosophy. I was called the

fiery one. As a young child, I spent a good deal of time in Italy, where an education in classical literature and art happens mostly through osmosis. Any trip to the grocery store included ancient mosaics or painting from the early renaissance. Trips to the beach were hindered by long lectures given by priests in the street. My mother is from a small seaside town on the eastern side of the island where there's a giant castle made out of lava that the Normans built in 1076 on top of a preexisting Byzantium structure. Farther down the shoreline sit three tall column-shaped lava islands. Supposedly, these are the rocks Cyclops threw at Odysseus. I learned how to swim in these waters, right in the middle of a Homeric poem.

My parents took my sister and me to lots of Greek ruins. Of course I have memories running up and down ancient theatre steps, singing my lungs out. Flashes of dangling Sicilian marionettes, granita, cigarette smoke, hot sun. I'm connected to ancient tragedy through my maternal side, and ignited by its animating force via my paternal side. Tragedy connects both islands of myself. I wrote *MEDEA* for the majority of my students who abhor her. Euripides' *Medea* was the first piece of literature I taught at the university. But no one would talk to Medea, or engage in a textual discussion of her character, actions, language, or inner voice. Medea's actions were unilaterally condemned (even by the young women!), and she was banished from our classroom. "She's insane," they'd say, with a quick wave of their hand. After that, I became obsessed with Medea's rational touches and turns of destruction. I started writing my Medea into all kinds of situations and refrains.

James Pate: *It's interesting that you bring up tragedy. To me, your reworking of MEDEA seems to de-emphasize narrative tragedy (the tragic event, etc.) in favor of what might be called a tragic tone, or a tragic style. Or, to put it another way, your MEDEA seems to be a lyrical contemplation of Euripides' Medea, and on the nature of tragedy itself, and less a modernized retelling of the Medea story. In this way, it seems similar in spirit to certain works by Godard (King Lear) and Acker (Great Expectations). How do you see tragedy operating in your reworking of MEDEA? Also, how do you see your MEDEA relating to/echoing with the original work?*

Catherine Theis: You're right. While there are tragic events and actions in my play, I remain interested in thinking about the role of tragedy as a form. Confronting a Western classical tradition seems backward-looking in many ways, especially to a lot of writers today, but I appreciate how it's always out in front of us, ahead of us. It receives us! I also do try, in Brechtian fashion, to alienate my readers but only so the isolation registers as something palatably different, eerily pleasurable, something I call "the middle distance." (I have a lot of these shorthands in my thinking!) But I also did choose the character of Medea specifically because of her female strength and outspokenness.

There is no other figure in tragedy quite like Medea. My reinvigoration of the Euripides' play mainly relies on Medea's character, her charisma, and her ability to talk across time. Memorable characters dance up and down the timeline of history. They know no bounds. Medea is what I call a *centuries talker*, someone who can interact with all kinds of audiences, from any time

period. I feel that's the ticket with a lot of experiences in life—when you have really great people around, nothing will bore. Everything sings alive. My MEDEA starts in Greece for sure, but it definitely makes a stop in ancient Rome.

Because Seneca did a version of *Medea*, too. And Ovid. All three versions influenced me. Unlike Euripides, Seneca's play opens with a dialogue where we find Medea appealing to the gods. "Gods of wedlock, and thou, Lucina guard / Of the marriage bed…." By not giving the Nurse the first speech, Seneca immediately places the character of Medea as our central focus point. What's also curious is how Seneca's play begins with the word "Gods" and ends with "there are no gods." What I love about Seneca's version is that within the first ten lines of the play, Medea names herself. This self-naming creates another power structure within the play. Medea proclaims her authority to all those listening, as well as to herself. Self-consciously, she sees herself and creates herself to be *heard and seen*. What I especially wanted to keep in my play was the fact that Medea is never punished for her actions. Her affirmation of liberty was the only thing I knew I had to keep from Euripides' play.

My MEDEA relies on *voiced* language, in the otherness of voice, in a cacophony of voices strung out, unattached to seemingly responsible bodies. There are a few moments where total corruption takes over. (I'm thinking of when The Milky Way is asked to dance, or when speech buries itself under a trap door.) A poetic theater tradition illustrates how notions of self and personhood are not connected to any one stable and verifiable entity. In a sense, a poetic interiority allows for the processional entrance of multiple characters. Like memory itself, a poetic theatre tradition is Destructive at its core. With a Vesuvian face, it burns yellow and gold, ringing in explosions and echoes.

What I hope is distinct in MEDEA, and what sets it apart, is that it uses language and line structure as a prominent feature in its composition: lines stand at attention, while detailed stage notes are back pinned for reference. Since poetic theater uses modes of exploration that rely on bodily and sensory perception (including intuition), the final creation is not concerned with traditional modes of realism. I like thinking about how this might be the cultivation of an interior zone that lies somewhere on the underside of both public and private, where memory functions as the triggering cue calling us back to the presence of an existing body either through the recognition of an image or a heard vibration. For me, it's the physical shock of language, its entrances and exits, its incantations.

When I was nineteen, I actually took a writing class with Kathy Acker. We read Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, a novel very much engaged with ideas of travel and language since all the characters are rendered speechless after traveling through a forest and so a Narrator must tell their stories through a Tarot deck. Voice pulled from a stack of cards? What I love about Acker's work, and the writing practice she exposed me to, is the idea that language always involves travel and generous listening, and that good writing always includes a Deleuzian line of escape—whatever that looks like—from a system of tradition. I love and hate tradition, I want it, and I want to leave it.

James Pate: *Something I find fascinating about poets' theater is the way it hovers ambiguously between page and stage. It's often said that plays are meant to be performed, not read (which is arguable, but it's a common expression). Yet works in the poetic theater tradition are meant to be read and performed. And not to sound overly mystic about it, but I've always thought the poetic theater tradition is closer to the actual origins of theater, since it's so language-focused: it's closer to ritual, festival, song, spectacle, etc., and less representational. As you write, "Like memory itself, a poetic theater tradition is Destructive at its core." What is your philosophy of poets' theater, and what works in that tradition influenced you while writing MEDEA?*

Catherine Theis: I love questions like this! My reading list is endless. I'm getting dizzy just thinking about it. I will share in just a moment. I need to get a drink of water first. For me, it's totally natural to write plays. Poetry and drama are both born of the same art, and not really independent of each other. It wasn't really until Romanticism maybe that we started breaking the writer into all her various parts. But I think poets' theater today has come to be understood as an extension of a twentieth-century avant-garde poetry tradition.

I agree with you that works in the poetic theater tradition must be both readable and performable but never at the same time. And so, poets' theater works in contradiction. Timeless texts of multi-genre components happening in a precise moment in time. Language as the ultimate Character. Let me leave you with this great quote from Lorca, which definitely contributes to my philosophy of poets' theater: "All theatre comes from the dank confined places. All true theatre has the strong stench of a rotting moon."

(gets up to get a glass of cheap Portuguese sparking white wine)

What I deeply admire in poets like H.D., James Merrill, T.S. Eliot, and John Ashbery is their ability to weave various voices into a single poem. These writers wrote for the stage because they were able to imagine dialogically. They can carry multiple voices into complex conversations. Poets are in an ideal position to translate both the narrative of a drama, as well as its underlying lyricism. The beauty of a dramatic text is that you can carry out voiced language into so many interesting places. The modes of transport are endless! (Spatial, material, psychic, literal, metaphoric, lyric). Poets' theater is a completely nebulous term, but if I do use the term it's more as the reflection or illustration of a poet's mind—the poet's mind hard at the work of translation. And this is something I've been trying to tease out for a while now: the relationship between the art of translation and dramatic works.

But first my influences….

Influences: All of Gertrude Stein's plays and operas. Shelley. T.S. Eliot. Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Federico Garcia Lorca's *Play Without a Title*, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *From Vampyr* and *Reveille dans la brume*, Tristan Tzara's *The Gas Heart* and *Handkerchief of Clouds*, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, this book with a fabulous early 60s

cover called *Artist’s Theatre: Four Plays, O’Hara, Ashbery, Merrill, Abel.* Kathy Acker’s *The Birth of a Poet*. Leslie Scalapino. James Merrill. Kenneth Koch. William Butler Yeats. And without H.D.’s provocative, multi-genre *Ion* and *Hippolytus Temporizes*, I would be lost.

Competing Influential Forces: Paolo Pasolini’s film *Accattone* is very important to me, but also his poems, his life. He did a Medea, too, you know. Antonin Artaud’s *The Theatre and Its Double.* John Cage. Pina Bausch. Peggy Phelan’s *Mourning Sex*, which is more a theory of performance. So then: the theoretical work of Jacques Rancière, Alain Badiou, Jerzy Grotowski, and Herbert Blau.

In all my worst nightmares, I suffer *aphonia*, the condition of being voiceless, without voice. Perhaps this is why I write plays and poetry. Perhaps this is why in certain public situations I prefer to listen, registering my resistance to those speaking so easily. In my own work, the cultivation of an acoustical imagination allows me generatively to explore how the invisible forces of the world impress me. I don’t have any proof of this but poetic theater tradition uses ancient refrains, recalibrating voices from interior and exterior worlds. Like lyric poems, words spoken in the theatre are wingéd words, traveling out beyond the speaker’s body to the audience. When we listen to characters talking in the theater—throwing their voices, so to speak—ultimately, what we are trying to do is decode or unearth meaning from the underside of sounds. We are straining to hear a character’s rich interiority, even as the voice is exterior. We inch ourselves closer to the stage to get a better listen.

Catherine Theis‘ latest book, *MEDEA* (Plays Inverse, 2017) is an adaptation of the Euripides story. Her first book of poems is *The Fraud of Good Sleep* (Salt Modern Poets, 2011), followed by her chapbook, *The June Cuckold*, a tragedy in verse (Convulsive, 2012). Theis has received various fellowships and awards, most notably from the Illinois Arts Council and the Del Amo Foundation. A graduate of the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, she is currently a Provost’s Fellow and PhD Candidate in Literature and Creative Writing at the University of Southern California, where she also translates

contemporary Italian poetry into English. Theis’ scholarly interests primarily focus on the intersection between translation, poetics, and performance studies.

Featured Image Credit: from *Contempt*, dir. Jean-Luc Godard (1964)