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EDITOR'S NOTE

In 1969, as he assumed the editorship of the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* (no. 23), Robert Brophy wrote that he “was gratified and honored at the invitation to serve.” That service, for 35 years, has been selfless and unflagging. Bob’s name must appear at the top of the short list of scholars and poets—Everson, Hunt, Hass, Gioia, Karman—who have done the most to ensure that Jeffers’s work remains relevant and available. Bob has contributed to our understanding of the poetry through his own criticism, especially the still invaluable *Robinson Jeffers: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol in His Narrative Poems*, which brought Jeffers criticism of age. He has also enhanced our knowledge of Jeffers, the man and the poet, in less obvious ways. Look at any issue of *RJN* or *Jeffers Studies* and you’ll find something about Jeffers explained, discovered, or collected by Bob, from the catalogue of the Tor House library in *RJN* no. 23 to the bibliography in this issue of *JS*. Bob’s commitment to this poet, who would probably wonder at such efforts on his behalf, is nothing less than astounding. We—the editorial staff and advisory board, contributors to and readers of *JS*, as well as the members of the RJA—need not wonder, but only need to be grateful that Bob is willing to continue to serve as senior editor. Thank you, Bob.

In 1997, Bob described the transformation of the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter* into *Jeffers Studies* as a transition from one era to another, and indeed it was. Readers will notice significant changes in *JS* now that I’ve assumed the primary editorial duties, though I wouldn’t call it a new era. The changes we’ve instituted are very much in line with the mission of *JS* as it was established seven years ago. *JS* will now be published semi-annually rather than quarterly. A twice-yearly appearance will make each issue more substantial (and we hope it will allow us to stay on schedule more often). Of course, this means that we’ll be reaching the RJA membership less frequently, and so “time-sensitive” information—announcements, conference proceedings, and other news—will not have as prominent a place as in the past. We will continue to pub-

lish “News and Notes” and the bulletin from the president of the RJA, and we continue to value the longtime members of the RJA whose interest in the poet is neither professional nor academic. The best indicators of Jeffers’s power and vision are the diversity of his audience and the breadth of his appeal. Nonetheless, we feel the new arrangement of the contents best reflects *JS*’s mission as an academic journal while still serving the RJA’s interests. We hope that all RJA members, and readers of American poetry in general, will reap the benefits we expect these changes to yield—an enlivened and enlarged conversation about the poetry of Robinson Jeffers.

RJA BULLETIN

ALEX A. VARDAMIS, RJA PRESIDENT 1999–2002

A RETROSPECT

In the Volume 5, Number 2, Spring 2001 issue of *Jeffers Studies*, I attempted to define my goals for the future of the Robinson Jeffers Association as an academic organization with close ties to universities and to the wider academic community. Now, I would like to say a few words about our sister Jeffers organization, the Tor House Foundation, and our relationship to it.

The THF was founded with the purpose of preserving Tor House and its collections. In recent years, preservation has included extensive repair and restoration of the original residence of the poet, of Hawk Tower, and of the East Wing, which was acquired by the Foundation in 1999. As part of this process, the THF launched a fundraising campaign to establish a library to preserve its growing collections. This renovation project, located in the East Wing, is now complete, and the library is open to scholars by reservation. THF's collection is managed by archivists Ripple Huth and Joan Hendrickson. A recent donation by Jeffers collector Dale Ditsler includes many first editions and rare items. The families of Garth and Donnan Jeffers generously support this endeavor. The THF continues to solicit contributions for the library.

Another function of the THF is to encourage interest in Jeffers and in poetry in general. As part of this endeavor, the THF sponsors, throughout the year, a series of poetry readings, lectures, and musical performances by well-known artists and writers. These events take place in a variety of local venues and, occasionally, in Tor House itself. In early May, the Garden Party offers hundreds of visitors a first glimpse of Tor House and an introduction to the poetry of Jeffers. Thanks to generous donations from THF Board Member John Varady, and the dedicated efforts of Poetry Coordinator Elliot Ruchowitz-Roberts, the Foundation is able to sponsor its prestigious annual Robinson Jeffers Tor House Prize for Poetry. This year Billy Collins will be the final judge in this contest that attracts hundreds of entries from all over the world.

Every October, the THF, as part of its mission, sponsors the Robinson Jeffers Fall Festival. It differs from the annual RJA Conference. First, the Fall Festival is always located in “Jeffers Country,” and therefore offers an opportunity to encounter the area that inspired Jeffers. Secondly, it is aimed at the general, but well-informed, public. This means less emphasis on academic theory and more on “experiencing” Jeffers.

Recent Fall Festivals are examples of this approach. Along with lectures and discussions intended to establish context, the Festivals provide a “hands-on,” participatory experience. In 2001, the emphasis was on examining Jeffers’s poetry on location. The activities included a bus trip to Big Sur. The sessions took place outdoors and at the Ranger Cabin at Point Lobos. In 2002, the theme was “Jeffers as Playwright.” The keynote address by Professor Mark Griffith of UC, Berkeley’s Classics Department, outlined the links between Jeffers and Greek drama. Along with other speakers, Stephen Moorer, producer/director of Carmel’s Pacific Repertory Theater, introduced his upcoming production of *Medea*. An operatic interpretation of *Medea*, with professional musicians from the Bay Area, was followed by dramatic renditions, with jazz accompaniment, of everything from “Drunken Charlie” to scenes from “A Bowl of Blood.” The Fall Festival in 2003, celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the THF, concentrated on Tor House as the architectural embodiment of Jeffers’s thought. Included were presentations by historians, architects, and geologists, as well as personal reminiscences by a Jeffers family friend. A highlight of every Fall Festival is the Sunset Celebration and Reception at Tor House that includes music and dramatic recitations of Jeffers’s poetry. The conclusion of the Fall Festival is always a Sunday morning poetry walk along Carmel River Beach.

During much of the time I was president of the RJA, I held the same position with the Tor House Foundation. As I see it, the two organizations fulfill separate, but complementary, functions. There is place for the academic RJA, with its function of furthering scholarly interpretation and appreciation of Jeffers. The mission of the THF, as I stated above, is, first and foremost, to preserve Tor House, Hawk Tower, and their collections for future generations. Secondly, it promotes the literary and philosophical legacy of Robinson Jeffers for the enrichment and enlightenment of the public and serves the community as a cultural resource.

The THF should not attempt to replicate the RJA’s annual academic conference. At the same time, the RJA should avoid duplicating the Fall Festival’s emphasis on Carmel and Tor House. The RJA should, instead, concentrate on Jeffers’s achievement in a broader intellectual context. The THF, in its function as custodian of the physical property,

has to be rooted in Tor House. On the other hand, the RJA has the freedom to work within the broader world of academic scholarship. Carmel might be a charming destination resort, but for the RJA to identify the work of Robinson Jeffers too closely with its narrow and winding lanes, is to limit the achievement of the poet. Jeffers is a major twentieth-century poet. The RJA has a duty to emphasize his accomplishment, not as a regionalist, but as a poet of world stature. To this purpose, the RJA would be better served if it held its meetings, not in Carmel, but within a wider academic venue.

JIM BAIRD, RJA PRESIDENT 2003–2005

PRESIDENT'S GREETING

My formal and critical interest in the poetry of Robinson Jeffers began over 30 years ago. During the succeeding years, I have seen Jeffers's reputation grow, at first by the individual contributions of scattered scholars whose focus on the poet was held together by the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter*, then by the establishment of the Tor House Foundation, by Tim Hunt's completion of the *Collected Poetry*, by the founding of the Robinson Jeffers Association in 1991 and its annual meetings beginning in 1994, and by the replacement of the *RJN* by a genuine scholarly journal, *Jeffers Studies*. Now to my own astonishment and gratitude, I find myself President of the Robinson Jeffers Association and in a position to urge all of you to help continue this process.

That growth has been a product of the industry of many scholars and critics, but primarily it has happened because of Jeffers's poetry itself. Our poet's work means even more to the twenty-first than the twentieth century as humankind continues on the path to ruin against which Jeffers warned. I do not suggest that Jeffers thought of himself as a political poet or as a critic of society, but in spite of his disclaimers, he is those things, and we have much to learn about how we should act from even his bleakest and most terribly honest lines. He has also brought his own unique contributions to the fields of mythology, poetic narrative technique including drama, cosmology, and other forms of both natural and physical science. Beyond these topical concerns, we must also remember—and this is easy to do—that Jeffers thought of poetry as serving no function except to be beautiful and powerful, like a hawk or like fire. A scholar who discovered Jeffers's work only recently described his poetry as “thrilling.” Jeffers's lines have the power to enrich the lives of his audience; therefore, they help us to explain to the world the basic point that art is not mere decoration but the foundation of a civilized life.

That growth will continue if the members of the Association continue to keep Jeffers's work before the public. The addition of Tim Hunt's *Selected Poetry* to our libraries helps us to build classes around the

works of the poet. James Karman's forthcoming new edition of Jeffers's letters will add to our store of scholarly material. We must continue to present papers not only at the meetings of the Robinson Jeffers Association, but at those of the American Literature Association, ASLE, California American Studies Association, Conference on Form and Narrative, MLA and its regional conferences, and Western American Literature Association. In addition to essays in *Jeffers Studies*, we must also place essays in journals of more general interest such as *American Literature* and *PMLA*. *Jeffers Studies* may also be made stronger through the active criticism of its readers in the form of letters to the editor. We also need to be certain that each library that we use has a subscription to *Jeffers Studies* and has also purchased the backfile of the *Robinson Jeffers Newsletter*.

Those with more specific ideas on how to expand the reputation of Jeffers or the role of the Robinson Jeffers Association may write to me (Department of English, University of North Texas, Denton, TX 76203; <jbaird@unt.edu>), or to the members of the Advisory Board. Some of our best ideas come from members of the general public. One of the strengths of the Robinson Jeffers Association and its sister organization the Tor House Foundation—still led by Alex Vardamis, whose work as the immediate past President of the Robinson Jeffers Association deserves the praise of all of us—is that its members include private citizens who are not academic professionals but amateurs in the best and original sense of that word. These people *love* Jeffers, and their ideas and opinions help to keep those of us, who, in part, think of understanding Jeffers's work as our job, grounded in that actual world that Jeffers himself celebrated.

ALEX A. VARDAMIS

MEDEA AND THE IMAGERY OF WAR

Medea has never been more popular. Twenty-five centuries after her first theater appearance, she is still wreaking bloody havoc across the stages of both America and Europe. For some reason the lethal lady from Colchis mesmerizes audiences. She seems to have captured the zeitgeist. In the recent past, versions of *Medea* have been performed in, among other places, Minneapolis, Pittsburgh, Harlem, Ontario, Dublin, London, Paris, Brooklyn, and Broadway. The vengeful and implacable infanticide has appeared in all sorts of guises—witch, goddess, proto-feminist, abandoned wife, woman wronged, foreigner, and outsider. The headline in a review in the *Wall Street Journal* (19 November 2002) of the sexually charged New York production reads “Updating Euripides with a chorus of Irish Housewives” and describes Medea’s “inability to stop her body from melting into Jason’s whenever he touches her.” A recent London production of *Medea* is reviewed as a case in extremism—“a Medea that terrifies men and hypnotizes women.” “Medea, the Musical” won an award in Los Angeles for an outstanding musical production. There have been African-American, Mexican, and Korean *Medeas*. There seems to be no end to *Medea*’s popularity. (For a discussion of current productions, see *American*.) Why has this play, some two and a half millennia after its first production, captured the American and European psyche?

To answer that question, we should examine why, in 1945, Robinson Jeffers decided to tackle the play, why Jeffers’s adaptation became a Broadway success in 1947, and why now, in the first years of the twenty-first century, *Medea*, and, especially, Jeffers’s version of it, is greeted with such acclamation. Relevant to these considerations are the historical events of 431 BCE that might have influenced Euripides to create and transform the legend of Jason and Medea. There are a number of possible reasons why Jeffers decided to do a translation of the Classical Greek drama.

The actress Judith Anderson had become keenly interested in Jeffers’s work, especially after performing in his dramatic poem, *The Tower*

Beyond Tragedy, based on Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. In 1941, Miss Anderson played the part of Clytemnestra in Carmel's Forest Theater. Jeffers, who attended three of her four performances, was impressed. "Miss Anderson's part in it was of course magnificent," Jeffers wrote, "and her desire to have it professionally staged remained unabated" (Bennett 219). However, the New York producers she approached were "naturally suspicious of a poem not primarily intended for acting, and written by an author unknown as a dramatist." Finally, one producer, Jed Harris, said he "was not willing to undertake 'The Tower' but, if she could get me to write a 'Medea,' he would consider it." Miss Anderson proposed the idea to Jeffers in 1945, and he promised to undertake the project. However, he stipulated "that I must be allowed large freedom of adaptation, because every Greek tragedy contains passages that would seem very dull, and others that would seem absurd . . . to a present-day audience" (Bennett 219). "The endeavor," Jeffers explained, "was to present Euripides' tragedy in a form and in poetry that might be interesting to an intelligent but not learned contemporary audience. . . . I tried to . . . emphasize the essential values of the play" (SL 310).

Jeffers acquiesced to Miss Anderson's request because he admired her acting ability, trusted her dramatic judgment, and felt he owed her a debt. He wrote the role of Medea for Miss Anderson. And he remained loyal to her. In 1948, when a disagreement between Miss Anderson and the Broadway producers of Jeffers's *Medea*, Robert Whitehead and Oliver Rea, led them to consider replacing her, the playwright sprang to her defense. He wrote to Whitehead and Rea, "I am not willing at this time to consent to any actress except Judith Anderson playing in America the title role of my adaptation of *Medea* . . . the play was written for Miss Anderson, and without her genius it might not have had any success . . ." (SL 309).

Euripides's *Medea*, as a character, fascinated Jeffers. For Jeffers and Anderson, and many others, the role of *Medea* is the *ne plus ultra* for a tragedienne. Within the Jeffers canon, she takes her place beside many passionate and strong-willed female characters. Tamar, California, Helen Thurso, Fayne Fraser, Claire, and Fera Cawdor come to mind. Behind all of them stands the image of Una, Jeffers's wife. Of Una, Jeffers wrote, "She is more like a woman in a Scotch ballad, passionate, untamed and rather heroic,—or like a falcon—than like any ordinary person" (CP 4: 392). Una, as Jeffers by this time had discovered, was, like *Medea*, fierce, jealous, and capable of violence.

"*Medea*," Jeffers declared, "is the portrait of a proud woman scorned; a loving woman, whose love, rejected and betrayed, turns terribly to hatred; a barbarian woman who triumphs over Greeks in their own country; a woman of such power and guile—which the Greeks admired,

remembering Odysseus—that she is able at last to stand alone against her husband and his friends and the whole city of Corinth, and overturn them” (Bennett 218). Jeffers also praised Euripides’s ability to portray real women. Euripides “was interested in women and understood them, whereas Athenian custom kept them shut up, out of sight, and generally out of mind” (Bennett 217–18).

There were external factors that influenced Jeffers’s decision to tackle the play. In 1945, when Jeffers was working on his adaptation, World War II was very much on his mind. The violent themes of *Medea* seemed appropriate. Jim Karman, in his *Poet of California*, mentions a “darkness in Jeffers’ soul from which his portrait of Medea emerged,” and finds “relevance of the play for modern times, where *Medea* represented the hate-filled violence of a war that had just claimed millions of innocent lives” (137). The work also helped Jeffers overcome writer’s block. He was having difficulty addressing new themes. *Medea* redirected his energies; working with Euripides’s text provided Jeffers with the aesthetic distance that he lacked in dealing directly with the events of World War II.

In addition, the prospect of translating a Greek drama challenged Jeffers. Although his own notes suggest that he used as reference the Alexander Harvey translation of the Greek text (a copy of Harvey’s translation can be found in the Tor House Library Collection), he was able to consult the original. He had studied Greek. He was also impressed by excavations of prehistoric sites in Greece. In explaining how he came to write *Tower Beyond Tragedy*, for example, Jeffers wrote, “I think that photographs of the famous Lion-gate, and other prehistoric stone-work, still standing at Mycenae, had something to do with my choice” (Jeffers, “Tower” 1). In Greek drama Jeffers found much that engaged his intellect. He explained, “In making poems of contemporary life, I find my mood cramped by the conventions and probabilities of the time. . . . To express a violent emotion violently, or a beautiful one beautifully, would be shocking in our daily life. But it is normal in Greek tragedy.” He continued, “Greek tragedy represents elemental human nature, stripped—like Greek sculpture—of its neutral and unessential clothing . . . (Jeffers, “Tower” 1).

Jeffers held Euripides in special esteem. He wrote that “Euripides was the youngest of this triumverate [*sic*], and he was never so entirely accepted by his contemporaries as the others [Aeschylus and Sophocles] were; but in later time his influence was deeper and wider. . . . But while Euripides lived, there was always a suspicion, which in fact remains to this day, that his work was not quite moral or solid, not quite ‘classical,’ compared to the work of the two older men” (Bennett 217). And, perhaps most of all, Jeffers valued Euripides’s ability to present “real and

understandable human beings, people you could identify with yourself, rather than ideal heroes and demigods” (Bennett 217).

In comparing mid-twentieth-century America with fifth-century BCE Athens, Jeffers explained that Euripides was

a private man, a disillusioned student and man of letters. The world had changed in his time, the great dream was fading. Recently Athens had been the savior of all Greece; but now Greece had fallen apart, and Athens, though grown much greater, was only an imperialistic power struggling with Sparta for supremacy, busy with confused battles and oppressions. Therefore, as many honest men have done since his time, Euripides chose to stay aloof from public life; and it seems to me that he was right in his time; but his fellow-citizens judged otherwise. (Bennett 217)

It is apparent that Jeffers identified with Euripides. In his 1948 essay, “Poetry, Gongorism and a Thousand Years,” Jeffers wrote: “Tragedy has been regarded, ever since Aristotle, as a moral agent, a purifier of the mind and emotions. But the story of ‘Medea’ is about a criminal adventurer and his gun-moll; it is no more moral than the story of ‘Frankie and Johnny’; only more ferocious. . . . What makes them noble is the poetry; the poetry, and the beautiful shapes of the plays, and the extreme violence born of extreme passion” (CP 4: 425).

The Broadway production of Jeffers’s *Medea* was a dramatic triumph, running for 214 performances, from 20 October 1947 through 15 May 1948. On opening night, “Judith Anderson gave the greatest performance of her career and received a storm of applause . . . She stood at the front of the stage beckoning to Jeffers in his box to stand, to share in the applause; but Jeffers, completely absorbed in Miss Anderson’s success, continued to clap, until Una finally got him to his feet to take one embarrassed bow” (Bennett 200). Jeffers later explained: “I did not want to go to New York on the opening night; simply because I do not like to hear my own verses recited.” But Miss Anderson took his “somewhat static attitudes and gestures . . . and wrought all into fluid fire” (Bennett 219–20). Audiences were as spellbound as the play’s author. “Night after night, ‘Medea’ played to a full house . . . lauded by the theater’s most astute critics, publicized in every newspaper and magazine in the country, with a two-page spread in *Life* magazine” (Bennett 201). *Medea* became Jeffers’s greatest financial success. It closed only because of the dispute between Miss Anderson and the producers.

Already in book form (1946), Jeffers’s adaptation had received high praise. A professor in the Department of Classics at Stanford wrote to Jeffers: [Your] “*Medea* is a living, breathing person, no longer the strange witch from the fringe of the Greek world. . . . You have made it thoroughly Greek in its simplicity, its vividness and awful tragedy. Some-

times I think you write better than the Greeks. . . . I like your version with Medea's words of bitter scorn, and Jason crushed and the sense of utter futility. You have breathed a new spirit into a great play and made it more appealing. We classicists will always be deeply indebted to you" (Bennett 195).

But not only were classicists impressed. Brooks Atkinson of *The New York Times* wrote rave reviews: "Jeffers's *Medea* is a landmark of the modern stage. His verse is modern, his words are sharp and vivid. . . . His imagery austere and brilliant. . . . Although Jeffers has retained the legend and the characters, he has freely adapted *Medea* into a modern play." By and large, astute critics across the country and abroad agreed with Atkinson (Vardamis 136–42). When Jeffers died in 1962, many of the obituaries remarked mostly on his work as a playwright. For example *Time* magazine concluded "this solitary poet of gloom is best known for his vividly free adaptation of Euripedes's *Medea*." The San Francisco *Chronicle* reviewer wrote, "a good argument might be made that the greatest thing Jeffers did for American poetry was to learn Greek . . . His version of the *Medea* is a truly great work of translation." *The New York Times*, in its obituary, wrote, "Jeffers was perhaps best known for his free adaptation of 'Medea.'" (Vardamis 230–32).

After Broadway, Jeffers's *Medea* went on the road: in 1948 to San Francisco, Edinburgh, and London; in 1949 to Honolulu, Denmark, Italy, and France; in 1951 to West Berlin; and in 1955 to Australia. Through the years, it has been staged in other countries as well. It was featured as David Susskind's first televised "Play of the Week" on 12 October 1959. In 1982 it had a five-week run with Zoe Caldwell in the lead at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC. In Carmel, Jeffers's adaptation was staged at the Forest Theater from 26 June through 5 July 1959, for 10 consecutive nights, with Ruth Warshovsky in the lead, to help celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Forest Theater. This was the stage where Judith Anderson in 1941 performed in Jeffers's *Tower Beyond Tragedy*. The play was mounted again in 1984 (21 September–6 October) at the Forest Theater, to open the season of the newly formed Pacific Repertory Theater. And in February–March 2003, Jeffers's *Medea* had a successful run at Carmel's Golden Bough, with Julia Brothers in the lead.

Jeffers's version continues to be singled out. The director of the 2002 production at Milwaukee's Chamber Theater had chosen it because Jeffers "was very much a pacifist" and accordingly the production had "a kind of antiwar angle, in the sense of anti what men tend to do—shake their spears and push everyone around." In a 2002 production in Los Angeles, the director focused on "intolerance of foreign races and reli-

gions,” emphasizing the Greeks’ condescending attitude toward the barbarian Medea. (See *American*.)

Jeffers made substantial changes to Euripides’s *Medea*. He did not want a literal translation. He modified the text for a modern audience, distilling and shortening many of the long speeches. Hence, Jeffers’s play is faster-paced than the original. Jeffers concentrated on concise dialogue. As Brooks Atkinson wrote: “Mr. Jeffers has dispensed with the formalities, editing most of the woe-woe out of the chorus speeches, and in the interest of melodramatic suspense he has not announced every five minutes what Medea is going to do . . . [Jeffers] has kept most of the speeches short, which is a blessing in or out of the theater, and his literary style is terse, idiomatic and sparing” (27). Jeffers made the chorus smaller (reducing it from 15 to three). Each chorus member has her own individual voice. One is a practical housewife, one timid and fearful, and the third something of a pontificator.

Jeffers, moreover, introduced animal imagery, suggesting human links with nature. Often, his animal references reflect the nobility, or, as the case may be, ignobility, of the characters. Jeffers’s *Medea*, for example, is fiercer than a “lioness.” Her children are “little falcons.” Her final sacrifice “glares . . . like a lion on a ridge.” In contrast, her enemies are “scavenger dogs” with “hairy snouts.” When Medea is forced to beg King Creon for her life, she proclaims, “you saw me low on my knees before the great dog of Corinth; humble, holding my heart in my hands / For a dog to bite:—*break this dog’s teeth*” (CP 3: 154).

Jeffers gave the play a California setting. In his foreword to the 1938 *Selected Poetry*, Jeffers said that the California coast from Carmel down to Big Sur was a landscape similar to Homer’s Ithaca, and thus comparable in its heroic and tragic possibilities. “Here was life purged of its ephemeral accretions. Men were riding after cattle, or plowing the headland, hovered by white sea-gulls, as they have done for thousands of years, and will for thousands of years to come” (CP 4: 392). His metaphors dealing with nature derive from the area he knew. Jeffers also removed the *deus ex machina* ending. In Euripides, Medea is swooped away by a chariot sent by the sun god. In Jeffers’s adaptation, there is much less emphasis on the gods throughout, to the point where Corinth seems to be a society without any gods.

Jeffers’s *Medea* exists within a cosmic scale. Whereas Euripides’s *Medea* has departed for Athens by the end of the play, Jeffers’s *Medea* is stage center. She is less interested in her escape than she is in exulting in her victory over Jason. In Euripides the last lines belong to the Chorus, who ascribe the tragic events to Zeus in Olympus. The last lines in Jeffers’s play belong to Medea. She declares that she departs under “the cold eyes of the weakness-despising stars” (CP 3: 197). Medea has

passed, in a Nietzschean sense, beyond good and evil. She is identified with the stars. On a literal level, she might be departing for Athens. However, that is secondary in importance. Jeffers's Medea, symbolically, is entering another realm.

Jeffers contrasts prudent, orderly, "civilized," rational, proportionate Greece to the wild, passionate, fierce, emotional Medea, who, above all, "will not endure pity." She is uncompromising. She refuses to bend. Also, she scorns the conventional. Her enemies are soft, bright, "smiling, chattering Greeks." She despises their weakness. She, the barbarian, the outsider in Corinth, is shrewd, strong, arrogant, and proud. Jeffers's Medea resembles a hawk. Like the hurt hawk in Jeffers's poem, Medea is a natural force. And like the hurt hawk, she is surrounded by cowardly dogs:

The curs of the day come and torment him
 At distance, no one but death the redeemer will humble that head,
 The intrepid readiness, the terrible eyes.
 The wild God of the world is sometimes merciful to those
 That ask mercy, not often to the arrogant. (CP 1: 377)

Medea's declaration, "I do according to nature, what I have to do" (CP 3: 182), a key line in the play, further suggests her identification with the wild forces of nature.

For each age there is a version of *Medea*, and what follows is another reading that seems particularly valid today.

After decades of war against the Persians (the final battle of Eurymedon took place in 467 BCE), the First Peloponnesian War (461–451 BCE) ended with the "Thirty Years Peace" between Athens and Sparta, a peace which, in fact, lasted only 20 years. During that interval, Athens and Sparta, economic and political rivals, competed for hegemony over the Greek city-states, islands, and colonies. When Corinth joined sides with the Spartans, war seemed inevitable. Each party was jealous of the other. Both Athens and Sparta felt wronged. After years of failed diplomacy, the Second, and most deadly, Peloponnesian War began in May 431 BCE, when King Archidamus of Sparta invaded Attica by land. The Athenians countered with a naval encirclement of the island of Aegina. The war dragged on, with victories, defeats, and vast casualties on both sides. In 404 BCE Athens was forced to capitulate to Sparta.

The fifth century BCE was almost as bloody as the twentieth century CE. Sparta's invasion in 431 BCE marked the beginning of a decades-long conflict that devastated the independent Greek city-states and ultimately led to the triumph of Macedonia in the middle of the next century. In February of that year of war, 431 BCE, Euripides's tragedy, *Medea*,

premiered in the annual Festival of Dionysus. It was greeted with enthusiastic acclaim.

Fast forward 2,376 years to 1945. The most devastating war in human history, World War II, was ending with aerial bombardment, massive destruction, and nuclear holocaust. In that year of war, Jeffers was asked to translate *Medea*. He accepted the task with enthusiasm and genius. His adaptation opened on Broadway in 1947 to broad acclaim.

Fast forward once again to the United States of America post-9/11. Terrorism looms large and our leaders promise us endless, relentless war against the forces of evil. Witness on stages all over America and in much of Europe a rash of productions of *Medea*, to enthusiastic acclaim. Why this current interest in the play? Is there a common link that ties fifth-century BCE Greece with 1945 and the early, troubled twenty-first century? Is there an unspoken message that resonates through the centuries?

Medea loves her sons. She even pleads that the earth swallow her before she harms them. Why, then, does she kill them? Is she insane? The problem is considerably cleared with a simple substitution. Instead of Mother Medea, consider that other entity that is often called "Mother." Instead of Mother, think of Nation. Or State. Or Tribe. Or Race. Then, all at once, the play becomes clearer and richer.

Do nations not, from time to time, feel sufficient loathing for the enemy that they kill their sons (and nowadays, daughters) in order to wreak vengeance? To be sure, nations sacrifice their children just as reluctantly as does Medea. But sacrifice they do. Whether it is a nation that feels so wronged that she invades another nation, knowing full well that some of her children will be slaughtered, or a terrorist cell that sends sons and daughters as suicide bombers into an enemy city to wreak vengeance, the motivation is little different from Medea's.

Medea "loathed" her enemy, Jason, more than she "loved" her sons (*CP* 3: 196). She is no more or less moral than a hawk striking its prey or a nation state silencing an enemy. For Medea, weakness is sin. Thus she uses her sons to achieve total, ultimate, complete victory and vengeance over her enemy.

Of course, we cannot know what was going through Euripides's mind, when, in a year of impending war, he created the Medea who kills her children. We should remember, however, that Medea, as an infanticide, was first introduced by Euripides. In earlier versions of the legend, after Medea kills Creon and his daughter, it is her Corinthian enemies who, in an act of vengeance, slaughter her children. Euripides, with his change, created one of the bloodiest roles in dramatic history.

We do know that Jeffers found war abhorrent. In the play there is apparent "Male-warrior" versus "Female child-bearer" imagery, but

Medea goes far beyond that. Medea is indeed a woman badly wronged. But that does not justify killing her children. Similarly, nations may be badly wronged. Nevertheless, that does not justify the wholesale slaughter that is modern warfare. It is this unspoken message of the basic immorality of war that makes this play so disturbing, and so important, for today. In *Medea*, war is personified in the title character. Jeffers's use of war imagery enriches his unspoken theme.

The first words out of Medea's mouth support this interpretation. "Death. Death is my wish. For myself, my enemies, my children. Destruction. / That's the word. Grind, crush, burn. Destruction" (CP 3: 142). Shortly thereafter, the second woman counsels,

Never pray for death, never pray for death,
He is here all too soon.
He strikes from the clear sky like a hawk,
He hides behind green leaves, or he waits
Around the corner of the wall. (CP 3: 144)

In terms of modern warfare, death can come from aerial bombardment, from an ambush, or from a sniper in hiding.

Medea compares childbirth to combat. "It is easier to stand in battle three times, in the front line, in the stabbing fury, than to bear one child" (CP 3: 154). Passionate love, too, is described in terms of war. The First Woman says, "A great love is a fire / That burns the beams of the roof. / The door-posts are flaming and the house falls. / A great love is a lion in the cattle-pen, / The herd goes mad, the heifers run bawling / And the claws are in their flanks. / Too much love is an armed robber in the treasury, / He has killed the guards and he walks in blood" (CP 3: 162).

War does not forgive. Medea, too, rejects forgiveness and compassion. When Jason responds that if his children were killed, he would "cut their killer into red collops," she replies, "vengeance / Makes grief bearable" (CP 3: 177).

The First Woman, in what could be a description of aerial bombardment answered by an artillery barrage, speaks of a godless universe, rumbling with violence and destruction: "I have heard evil / Answering evil as thunder answers the lightning, / A great waste voice in the hollow sky, / And all that they say is death. I have heard vengeance / Like an echo under a hill answering vengeance, / Great hollow voices: all that they say is death" (CP 3: 182). Lest there be any ambiguity in the war imagery, the Second Woman immediately reinforces the theme: "The sword speaks / And the spear answers: the city is desolate. / The nations remember old wrongs and destroy each other, / And no man binds up

their wounds" (CP 3: 182). In these lines Jeffers conflates the vengeance of Medea with the vengeance of "the nations."

Soon thereafter the First Woman links war, aerial bombardment, and the hawk: "She fled from her father's house in a storm of blood, / In a blood-storm she flew up from Thessaly, / Now here and dark over Corinth she widens / Wings to ride up the twisted whirlwind / And talons to hold with—" (CP 3: 183). Jason's bride, Creusa, dies like someone killed in an air raid: "she ran, she was like a torch, and the gold crown / Like a comet streamed fire; she tore at it but it clung to her head; the golden cloak / Was white-hot, flaying the flesh from the living bones; blood mixed with fire ran down, she fell, she burned / On the floor, writhing" (CP 3: 188). When Creon, father of Creusa, tries to smother the flames, he, too, is burned alive: "The fire stuck to the flesh, it glued him to her; he tried to stand up, / He tore her body and his own. The burnt flesh broke / In lumps from the bones. . . . They lie there. / Eyeless, disaced, untouchable; middens of smoking flesh laced with molten gold . . ." (CP 3: 188–89).

In his recent book about the devastating effects of Allied bombardment of German cities in World War II, W. G. Sebald describes how the citizens of Hamburg were burned alive in a firestorm that "lifted gables and roofs from the buildings, flung rafters and . . . billboards through the air, tore trees from the ground and drove human beings before it like living torches . . . Those who had fled from their air-raid shelters sank, with grotesque contortions, in the thick bubbles thrown up by the melting asphalt" (Rev. of *On the Natural History*). One of the characteristics of white phosphorus fire-bombing, such as was used against Hamburg, was that victims were untouchable. Those who went to their aid became, themselves, victims in exactly the same manner as Jeffers describes the death of Creon.

When Medea hears how Creon and Creusa have perished, she cries out triumphantly, "Our enemies . . . are down in the ashes. / Crying like dogs, cowering in the ashes, in their *own* ashes" (CP 3:189). She next directs her fury on Jason. "I want him crushed, boneless, crawling . . ." (CP 3: 190). When the nurse warns her to flee, Medea replies like a warrior: "I have a sword in the house. / I can defend you" (CP 3: 191). In an act of ultimate vengeance, she kills her two children. When their father, Jason, sees their bodies, he says, "No wild beast could have done it." (CP 3: 195). Medea replies, "I have done it: because I loathed you more / Than I loved *them*. Mine is the triumph" (CP 3: 196). Like a victorious commander in battle, Medea gloats over her defeated foe: "I have met you, throat for throat, blood for blood, betrayal for betrayal" (CP 3:197). The play ends with Medea's lines, "Now I go forth / Under the cold eyes of the weakness-despising stars:—not *me* they scorn" (CP

3:197). Medea's universe recognizes only one value: strength. The greatest sin is weakness.

How often in wartime do the leaders of nations invoke that principle. We must win, they declare, despite the costs. If we must sacrifice our youth to achieve victory, so be it. There is no substitute for victory. Destroy the enemy. That was said by both sides in the Peloponnesian Wars. That cry has echoed through the ages. It was the justification for the Allied carpet bombing of German cities in World War II. It was the rationale for the nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is the guiding principle in the current war on terrorism. The need for vengeance is inexhaustible. That is why Euripides's play, and especially Jeffers's adaptation, with its specific war imagery, is so relevant and vital today.

Jeffers's overtly antiwar volume, *The Double Axe* (1948), drew a barrage of protest from all quarters and caused the publisher, Random House, to include a disclaimer, disassociating the firm from the author's political views. Ironically, *Medea* carries the same strong antiwar message and played on Broadway at the same time as the publication of *The Double Axe*. Because *Medea*'s antiwar message was subtle and covert, it went virtually unnoticed.

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MARK GRIFFITH

ROBINSON JEFFERS
AND GREEK TRAGEDY

One of the prime resources available to poets writing in English (or French, or German) throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has always been Classical Greek culture, with its extensive and familiar repertoire of mythology, its distinguished literary and dramatic canon to challenge and subvert, and its foundational status within the tradition of philosophical and critical ideas. In exploring these resources, writers have varied greatly in their levels of first-hand familiarity with the Greek originals, and their attitudes to them have ranged from respect, even devotion, to the most radical rejection and iconoclasm; but few have completely ignored those looming ancestors. In earlier centuries, it had been the Romans who provided the Classical models for most of the European arts; but once the Romantics (especially in Germany and England) had elevated Hellenism to the pinnacle of intellectual and artistic originality and perfection, and had relegated Latin literature (and Roman sculpture, architecture, etc.) to a merely derivative, even imitative, status, all kinds of poets found themselves impelled at one time or another in their careers to turn to the Greeks for models to emulate or critique, frameworks on which to hang their own new techniques and ideas, springboards for their own individual flights of imagination, and familiar structures to be defamiliarized and deconstructed.¹ And nowhere has this been more true than in the field of drama.

Robinson Jeffers, whose education, both in Europe as a child and subsequently at Occidental College, exposed him to extensive reading of Greek literature and philosophy, was as heavily influenced as any poet of his generation by his encounters with Classical Greek culture; and this general influence has been well documented both by himself and by critics.² And although he did not really think of himself as a dramatist, and never wrote with the stage in mind until the mid-1940s,³ there are many aspects of his poetic style and vision that suggest comparison with the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, as well as with the ideas of Aristotle and of such Hellenophilic thinkers as Schopenhauer

and Nietzsche.⁴ In this article, I shall focus in particular on the two dramatic works that are most directly inspired by Greek originals, *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* and *Medea*, both because these are the two that by general critical agreement have the strongest claims to poetical and theatrical success, and because they are also the two that stayed closest to the Greek plays on which they are based.⁵ *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* is a dramatic poem based on Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and Euripides's *Electra*, written in 1924–25 but first published in the 1926 collection, *Roan Stallion*. It was not originally intended for the stage, though it was intermittently performed by amateur theatrical groups from the 1920s through the 1940s.⁶ After the extraordinary success of Jeffers's *Medea*, it was eventually adapted in 1950 by Jeffers himself for the professional New York stage (for the winter series of the American National Theatre and Academy), with the encouragement and input of Judith Anderson, who took the role of Clytemnestra. (The production was not very successful, though Anderson's performance was much acclaimed. Jeffers himself described the rest of the cast as unsatisfactory [Bennett 223–26].)

Jeffers's *Medea* was completed in 1945 and published in 1946. It was the first play Jeffers intended for staging as a conventional theatrical production, and he made it clear on several occasions that in this case too he would never have made the attempt but for the friendly yet insistent pressure of Judith Anderson, who had been seeking for months to launch a New York production of the play with herself in the starring role. The resulting text, which identifies itself on the title-page as "freely adapted from the *Medea* of Euripides," actually adheres quite closely to Euripides's plot and general structure, though it is thoroughly rewritten in its linguistic details, to the point that only intermittently could it be regarded as a direct "translation" of Euripides's Greek.⁷ After two trial versions had been produced on college campuses, the play was brought to the New York stage in 1947 with John Gielgud directing and co-starring as Jason. It was an immediate critical and box-office success—much to Jeffers's surprise—and ran for over a year, thus establishing him for a while as a major American "playwright," a category into which it seems he had never intended to place himself.⁸

My purpose in this article is, first, to contextualize the activity of "doing Greek tragedy" in the English language, on the American stage, in the middle of the twentieth century; secondly, to comment on Jeffers's overall approach to the particular challenge of adapting these well-known Greek texts for his own poetic purposes; and finally, to point out some particular elements in the Greek originals that may have suggested to Jeffers certain distinctive turns of plot, thought, and phraseology for his own two dramas. (I should make clear that I myself have come to this topic as a scholar of Greek tragedy, rather than as a Jeffers expert.)

Let us begin with the obvious enough question: how should we set about assessing the aims, expectations, and achievement of a poet in the 1920s, or 1940s, when he took on the challenge of restaging, or updating, or converting, these foundational classics of Western theater for an American audience and a moral-aesthetic program that were both radically at variance (or so it would seem) with those of democratic Athens in the fifth century BCE? Why did Jeffers decide to adapt Greek dramas in the first place, and why did he choose these two stories in particular to work on? In what ways and to what degree does his treatment of these two plays attempt to capture the key issues and qualities of their Greek originals? And conversely, in what ways has Jeffers chosen instead to transform them into distinctive and original works of his own?

“The ancient Greeks”—like other well-established traditions and canons—are always undergoing revision and reassessment from generation to generation: thus “Classical culture” and “Greek tragedy,” as imagined and experienced by the artists and intellectuals of the early decades of the twentieth century, had a flavor quite different from that of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries (see Jenkyns). On the whole, Jeffers’s political and aesthetic views with regard to “Hellenism” seem to have been broadly speaking “Romantic” and quite closely in alignment with prevailing early twentieth-century Western notions. In his poem entitled “Hellenistics,” for example, he refers to certain historical and cultural differences between the Greeks (on the one hand) with their “lean faces like lance-heads, the grace of panthers,” and (on the other) the “dull welter of Asia”—a stereotypically “Orientalist” view, we might say, characteristic of Jeffers’s era and training, though perhaps a view that he might not have maintained in all areas of his writing. It is certainly true that Jeffers’s attitude to the military-political achievement of Alexander the Great, and even to the philosophical and scientific contributions of Classical Greek civilization, remained ambivalent, and his poetry often expresses disdain for the conventional trappings and institutions of Western civilization and imperialism. On the other hand, Jeffers’s thinking, as many have pointed out, was deeply influenced by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche—both of them radical Hellenophiles, and both promoters of very distinctive views of nature, in each case one which acknowledges, and even embraces, the inhuman but harmonious harshness of the universe in which we live, and which asserts the value of “strong” Greek morality (or amorality) in opposition toward the false complacency and moralistic cant of Judaeo-Christian religion and ethics.

This influence on Jeffers seems to have extended also to a respect for the art-form that Nietzsche made the focus of his first book, the brilliant and idiosyncratic *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music* (1879).

Furthermore, in the case of many writers (though perhaps not Nietzsche himself) a notion of “the tragic” has often spilled over from the particular genre of drama (stage “tragedies” as verbally and physically performed) to involve a whole outlook on life (a “tragic” world-view): so we may ask whether this is the case for Jeffers too. Was there something important, even essential, for him in the combination of “Greek” and “tragic”? Is that why he went to Aeschylus and Euripides for source-material and poetic inspiration? Or was his borrowing of Greek dramatic forms and themes due to some other set of interests? What were the particular reasons why Jeffers felt himself drawn to an engagement with Greek tragedy, drawn to justify or test his artistic principles against the familiar and enduring standard of Classicism and the canon of Western drama?

Jeffers was of course unusually well-educated, trained in Latin and Classical Greek from an early age, in both Europe and America, and his continuing interests in philosophy and science also required him to read widely and think deeply about a number of ancient Greek authors (Brophy, “Tor House Library”). Indeed, Jeffers’s life-long insistence on “contemplation” of the universe, and on the transcendental value of perceptual and intellectual activity—looking and wondering at nature, at the movements of the stars, at the order and logic of the physical and biological world—has much in common with that of Aristotle, whose famous dictum at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* (“All men by nature desire to know” [Book 1, ch. 1 980a22]), along with his insistence that “wondering” (*thaumazein*) provides the first and most important impulse towards close observation, serious thinking, knowledge, and hence virtue and happiness (*Metaphysics*, Book 1, ch. 2 982b12), plays into a view of “God” as the unifying sum-total of intelligence and intelligibility in the universe, a divine principle of order and coherence in phenomenal multiplicity, that looks back to Heraclitus and Plato, yet also promotes an entirely anti-Platonic confidence in the beauty and purposeful symmetry of the world of plants and animals. (Aristotle himself did after all compose lengthy works on the *Movement of Animals*, *Physics*, and *The Heavenly Bodies*, as well as *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Logic*.) Famously too, Aristotle’s *Ethics* and *Politics* waver back and forth between “practical” and “theoretical” wisdom, and between recommending the social life of politics and personal interactions, as against the quasi-divine activity of solitary contemplation (*theōria*), as being man’s highest goal and source of ultimate satisfaction and meaning. Jeffers’s own notions of human wisdom and morality for the most part come down decidedly on the side of *theōria* rather than social praxis—but his lyric and dramatic explorations of individual contemplation and spiritual connection with the mysterious, beautiful, and only partially intel-

ligible world out there (a world “full of gods,” as the early Greek philosopher Thales put it), along with his insistence on the peculiar “excellence” to which his most exceptional and visionary dramatic characters aspire (notably, Orestes and Medea), all have much in common with the *aretê* (“excellence, virtue”) of Aristotle’s “good man” or “great-souled man” (*megalopsychos*). This self-sufficient intellectual and aesthetic “aristocrat” came in turn to be adopted (and adapted) by Nietzsche in designing his idealized Zarathustra—and also in imagining the first (Apollonian) creator of order and beauty out of the formless, chaotic, amoral, and terrifying (“nauseating”) flow of Dionysian energy in *The Birth of Tragedy*—a creator for whom Jeffers seems to have felt a strong affinity.

But whereas Nietzsche connected this natural, original “flow” to the “Spirit of Music,” and to the communal surge of dancing choruses with their concomitant loss of individual self-consciousness, Jeffers in his drama (and elsewhere) seems to reject the populist, ritualistic, and musical aspects of Dionysian theater, in favor of a more austere Apollinian contemplation and sublimation. Exuberant language and violent stage action are certainly important for Jeffers’s tragic vision; but there is little trace in his dramas of dance, choral movement, modified vocal inflection, chant, or specifically musical shape.⁹ Jeffers’s poetic narratives thus have little in common with the *Gesamtkunstwerke* of Wagner or the operatic compositions of Richard Strauss, or Arthur Honegger, for example, all of whom wrote operas adapting Greek dramatic themes and/or style. (Nor did many others of the European or American staggers and adapters of Greek tragedy between the two World Wars pick up on the musical or choreographical elements of Greek drama. “Realism” was still the prevailing style of acting, and tragedy continued to be for most writers primarily a spoken, often quite cerebral, medium.)

Although Jeffers, as noted above, professed to have very little knowledge of, or interest in, the theater, his decision to attempt new versions of the *Oresteia* and *Medea* stories was not in itself surprising or unconventional. Many poets of the early or mid-twentieth century picked up the challenge of translating/adapting/revising Greek classics for the modern stage. Indeed, it was almost expected that you should do this, at some point or other in your career, as if to show what you (and/or your particular “school” or aesthetic or clique or “movement” of writers and readers) were really made of, and to prove that you belonged in the serious Western tradition of poets. Other early/mid-twentieth-century poems that translated/adapted one or more Greek tragedies in English include W. B. Yeats’s *Oedipus Rex* (1926; later used by Tyrone Guthrie in his celebrated and much-travelled production of the 1950s), T. S.

Eliot's *The Family Reunion* (1939), Ezra Pound's *The Women of Trachis* (1957), Hilda Doolittle's ("HD") *Hippolytus* (1927) and *Ion* (1931), Eugene O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms* (1924; based on Euripides's *Hippolytus*) and *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1929; based on Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and Euripides's *Electra*), and Louis MacNiece's *Agamemnon* (1936); while from France came André Gide's *Oedipe* (1930), Jean Cocteau's *La Machine Infernale* [*Oedipus*] (1932), Jean Giraudoux's *Electra* (1937), Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Mouches* [*The Flies*] (1943), and Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* (1944), which have all established themselves as theater classics; and in/from Germany Bertold Brecht's various productions of *Antigone* from the 1930s through the 1950s amounted in themselves to a virtual manifesto of his theatrical techniques. And of course this phenomenon was by no means a twentieth-century or "Modernist" innovation: the nineteenth century had seen countless verse narratives and dramatic lyrics modeled more or less closely on Greek originals, and Jeffers—who in many respects regarded himself as distinctly anti-Modernist in his technique and his aesthetics—clearly owes much more (especially in a poem such as *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*) to Tennyson, Swinburne, or Browning than to any twentieth-century dramatist.¹⁰

Every adapter or translator necessarily brings his/her own agenda, approach and aesthetic principles, his/her own bookish or stagey concerns, such that some have created enduring masterpieces of twentieth-century theater, while others produced merely intellectual experiments or curiosities that have excited more critical interest among academic specialists than commercial or popular success (in the form of actual performance or readership). But the sheer number of such attempts at adaptation, of all kinds and styles, by such a wide range of distinguished writers, is in itself striking and instructive. Why should this be so? Wherein lies the (apparently irresistible) appeal of Greek tragedy? Why do so many poets gravitate towards translating, adapting, citing, and borrowing from those old plays, originally composed for a society so different from ours, in a verbal and musical language now available to precious few? The reasons are many, some more obvious than others, and some arising from, and appealing to, different poetic sensibilities than others.

First and foremost, perhaps, is the simple fact of the foundational status for "Western Civilization" that is (or was) held by these texts—and especially by the *Oresteia* and *Medea* in particular.¹¹ This is the tradition in which virtually every well-educated Westerner was raised at least until the 1950s; and consequently these were their cultural "Ancestors," to be acknowledged and competed against—and if necessary, overthrown. At the same time, fifth-century BCE Athenian tragedies stand at a considerable distance from us (in location, date, historical and

social context, and of course in language), a distance that enables—even requires—greater liberties in the processes of adaptation or translation than is generally acceptable in the case of a more familiar and accessible “classic” (such as a play by Shakespeare or Chekhov). Potentially adding to this “distance” too are the formal conventions of the ancient theater, whose alien conventions of chorus, masks, music, and choreography all invite modern directors, designers, and actors to move outside contemporary Western norms of realistic sets and naturalistic acting, and to explore more physical and stylized forms of movement and vocal technique (even if in fact relatively few Western writers or stage directors seem to have responded to these possibilities until the 1960s).

Another reason for the recurrent appeal of Greek tragedy is undoubtedly its cosmic scale, coupled with its remarkable economy of resources. We confront “the gods,” “fate,” whole cities and dynasties falling to ruin (and occasionally new dynasties, institutions, and cults being founded, as at the end of Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*): yet the original productions in the Theater of Dionysus at Athens used only three speaking actors (plus chorus and non-speaking extras), and each drama was less than 2,000 lines long. The Greek plays typically comprise extremely tightly constructed plots, which not only observe a single trajectory of action, free of Shakespearean sub-plots and switches of focus and tone (i.e., they observe what the neo-Classical critics claimed as the three “unities”—time, place, and action—as well as maintaining the “decorum” of formal and elevated diction and deportment), but also within each scene adhere to strict codes of closely argued dialogue, disciplined verse structure, and focused concentration on a central issue or choice. Yet at the same time, even as the economy of each play emphasizes confrontation, argument, decisions, and action (“plot,” in Aristotle’s terms), it still leaves room for lyrical excursus, vivid narrative, intra-familial psychology, and (especially in Euripides’s plays) individual characters’ introspection. Furthermore, even though the plot-structure and formal conventions of these plays are so tightly organized, they do offer some variation of linguistic and emotional registers, with their expansive mythological references, bold patterns of linguistic and visual imagery, alternations between lyrical description and crisp argumentation, and contrasts of high and low characters. Thus, for example, in the *Oresteia* the exotic and surreal revelations of the captive prophetess Cassandra in dialogue with the domineering Clytaemnestra, or in *Medea* the contrast of mentalities and language between Queen Medea and her beloved old Nurse, and also with the chorus of Corinthian women who are their friends and confidants, add crucial depth and texture to their respective dramas.

But above all, perhaps, the appeal of those Greek plays lies in their “universal” themes, themes of family hatreds, betrayals, and violence, of gender conflict and clashes of political and domestic loyalties. So, for example, in the *Oresteia*, Agamemnon can only win political glory and do his military duty if he sacrifices his daughter first and then goes on to kill and enslave countless innocent women and children at Troy; Clytemnestra can only assert her devotion to her slaughtered daughter, and her own claims as a desiring and political subject, by killing her husband; and Orestes can only prove his loyalty to his father by killing his mother. Individual aspirations are pitted against cosmic/social/divine limitations (we think of such characters as Oedipus, Phaedra, Philoctetes, and Antigone, as well as Orestes, Electra, and Medea); vengeance is pitted against compassion (at the end of the *Oresteia*, and in Medea’s agonized speech to herself before resolving to kill her own children); and human beings frequently confront the prospect of divine injustice or indifference, as in the closing scenes of Euripides’s *Electra* and *Medea*, as we shall see (for the “archetypal” aspects of many of these mythic patterns, see Brophy, *Myth*).

In a short *New York Times* article published in 1950, Jeffers himself wrote about his reasons for choosing “Greek stories” as a source or impetus for his own dramas (“Tower”).¹² In this article, he offers two general reasons why Greek tragedy is good to start from, and then adds two very specific factors that led him personally to choose the Orestes story for this first venture into playwriting. The general appeal of Greek tragedy, he says, is two-fold: (i) our admiration of the “natural” and of the “eternal beauty, without local or national taint,” of these timeless stories; (ii) our appreciation of the “uninhibited” and “elemental” nature of both the action and the language—a lyrical quality both wilder, more violent, and more intense than the muted understatement of contemporary American speech and behavior (this was, of course, written in the 1950s—perhaps things are no longer so tame and understated these days, either in art or in real life).¹³ These two principles clearly correspond closely to those I outlined in the preceding paragraphs, and are consonant with nineteenth-century Romantic yearnings for Hellenic “naïveté” and spontaneity (in contrast to Roman “sentimentality” and decadence), and also with more recent (early twentieth-century) European currents in anthropology, psychology, and comparative religious studies, with their new-found fascination for the “primitive” and “original” in Archaic and Classical Greek culture.

Jeffers then goes on to explain his particular choice of the Agamemnon/Clytemnestra/Electra/Orestes-story, providing two reasons for this choice that are, at the same time both strikingly arbitrary, and yet extraordinarily apt. Jeffers remarks that he had always been impressed by the

photographs of excavations at pre-historic Mycenae, mentioning specifically “the stone-work” and the famous “lion-gate.” When we bear in mind Jeffers’s own life-long passion for massive stone-built buildings (including his own hand-built “Hawk Tower”), along with his almost obsessive use of images of lions (along with other animals and birds of prey—tigers, eagles, falcons, etc.) in so many of his poems, then we may acknowledge that an especially resonant chord was indeed struck in Jeffers’s mind by the physical site of Mycenae, mythical home of Agamemnon and Orestes, and by its man-made yet timeless and enduring walls and gateway. This visual imagery, combining stone, doors, and wild animals, flows directly into Jeffers’s own poetic vocabulary, and finds kindred expression there—and especially so in these two Greek-based tragedies.

Thus the final scenes of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* provide an extraordinary sequence in which first Orestes confides to Electra that he has dreamed “more than brotherwise” about her, and then she attempts to seduce him (while continuing to insist on the propriety and value of their incestuous feelings for one another), before Orestes finally renounces all further connection with this family and this city, and proclaims, “the gate’s open . . . I have greater / Kindred than dwell under a roof” (CP 1: 176). At the end, the narrator concludes, Orestes “had climbed the tower beyond time, consciously” (CP 1: 178). This doorway is clearly imagined both as immensely solid and stable, and as potentially giving access to a higher realm inaccessible to all but a few.¹⁴ And earlier in the drama, Cassandra’s extraordinary powers of understanding and expression (her mantic, Apollo-derived gift, which several critics have identified closely with Jeffers’s own authorial perspective) are described in terms of “stone” and “towers” too. (CP 1:144, 149). Likewise, in *Medea* Jeffers includes, not only numerous references to Medea’s “stone”-like and “lion-eyed” (i.e., unyielding, intransigent) nature (CP 3: 140, 143), but also insistent references in both the text and stage-directions to the huge and elaborate doorway which ends up in the final scene separating the defeated Jason from the triumphant Medea, as she removes the dead children from his reach and prepares to depart to another place (or plane or sphere of existence).¹⁵ This is the same Medea whose heart (in language taken directly from Euripides’s own) is both “like a stone” and “lion-eyed” (CP 3: 140, 141). Indeed, the “rock” is already found as a symbol of human hardness of heart as early as the *Iliad*, in one of the most striking and imitated passages in all of Greek literature; for it is in precisely these terms that Patroclus complains of Achilles’s hard-heartedness and intransigence: “The gray sea was your mother, and the steep rocks” (*Iliad* 16. 34–35, my translation)—a passage in turn imitated in Euripides’s *Medea*, where the Nurse remarks,

“Like a rock, or the wave of the sea, she listens to the advice of her friends” (28–29, my translation). Jason also calls her “a lioness, not a woman!” (1342, cf. 187–88, my translation)—an accusation that Medea herself welcomes. In both plays, then, this happy coincidence of poetic language and geographical-architectural-zoological reality (rock, lion-gate) proved a peculiarly apt stimulus for Jeffers’s imagination.

In this same newspaper article, Jeffers adds (quite correctly) that “The Greeks were always changing their stories, and I think we inherit that privilege . . .” Borrowing a “Greek story” (and of course the Greek word for “story” is simply “mythos”—whether the “story” or “myth” of Medea and Jason in all its multiple versions, or the “plot” of Euripides’s *Medea* in its particular structure and details) brings with it the license to adapt, innovate, even transform that story just as the Greeks were constantly doing themselves. This is conspicuously true of the originals from which Jeffers’s two best-known adaptations of Greek tragedy were taken.¹⁶ Both Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* and Euripides’s *Medea*, even though they quickly attained a quasi-canonical status and thus became to some degree the “standard” version of each story, were in their first performances startlingly innovative in certain key features of the plot, as compared with all previous versions (and there were many preceding versions, as we know, including several tragedies produced on the Athenian stage). Thus Aeschylus’s conclusion of the *Oresteia*, with Orestes coming to Athens after his matricide to be protected by Athena and tried for murder in a newly founded homicide court, appears to have been a new and unexpected twist to “the story” in 458 BCE; while the killing of Medea’s young children by their own mother is apparently a Euripidean innovation—in all previous versions, it had been the citizens of Corinth who killed the children in rage at Medea’s murder of their king and his daughter. So when Jeffers states, “I took two or three Greek tragedies, changed them considerably, and made them into a poem” (referring to *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*), he should not be thought of as taking unusual or illegitimate liberties with the Classics, but as entering into the spirit of ancient Greek playwriting and dramatic competition—always experimenting, always bringing things up to date, always applying a new twist to familiar “classic” material.

The Athenian playwrights were drawing not only from each others’ works, but also of course from Homer and scores of epic and lyric narratives that had been circulating for generations, and often it is very hard for modern scholars to be sure where and when a particular detail of plot, nomenclature, genealogy, or characterization may have originated, since so much of Classical Greek literature is now lost. In the case of nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers, however, the stock of extant Classical “sources” has remained broadly the same; so it is somewhat

easier to trace their debts and innovations. The seven surviving plays of Aeschylus, seven of Sophocles, and 19 of Euripides have comprised the modern canon of Greek tragedy ever since the sixteenth century, when they were first printed and republished in the West, and so began to (re)claim their own place beside the Latin adaptations of Seneca.

On the other hand, it is often difficult to know in what form and by what precise means modern authors have gained their familiarity with their ancient original(s). For, just as Shakespeare's knowledge of Plutarch (whose *Lives of the Greeks and Romans* he mined extensively for *Coriolanus*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*) came via Thomas North's English version of Amyot's French translation of a Latin translation of Plutarch's Greek originals (since, as Ben Jonson scornfully remarked, Shakespeare knew very little, if any, Greek), and John Keats's knowledge of Greek mythology came through such indirect and imperfect channels as Chapman's Homer and Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary* (rather than his own close reading of Homer or Ovid in the original), likewise relatively few twentieth-century poets have been confident and accomplished readers of Classical Greek. Most have preferred to work at second hand, relying on the translations of others, or even on handbooks and summaries, and their own memory of childhood readings. And although professional Classicists and pedantic reviewers often complain about inaccuracies or purposeful liberties taken by ignorant or irresponsible translators and adapters, sometimes a lack of first-hand engagement with the Greek text (or at least an attitude of cheerful independence towards it) can be a positive advantage, in freeing the adapter to follow his/her own instincts and artistic goals.

In Jeffers's case, it is not clear how often or how attentively as an adult he continued to read the Classical Greek texts that he had studied as a boy and a young man. That he knew and remembered a wide range of Classical literature from his days as a student is obvious enough; and many of these texts were still available to him in his personal library at Tor House for renewed consultation. But it is hard to tell whether he was in the habit of rereading them in the original Greek.¹⁷ The text of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, although it follows the main outlines of the first two plays of the *Oresteia*, before branching off into an ending that owes much more to Euripides's *Electra*, makes no explicit claims to being a translation or even an "adaptation" of these Greek originals, and presents itself as a self-standing poem on its own.¹⁸ We may doubt that Jeffers was particularly concerned to wrestle with the intricacies of Aeschylus's complex and tortuous Greek (which normally require considerable head-scratching and recourse to scholarly commentaries, even for more professional Classicists). Indeed in this case the original seems to have provided little more than a springboard for Jeffers's own ideas,

and he clearly did not feel obliged to follow it as any kind of blueprint or model for particular details. Even in the case of his *Medea*, we may wonder how the “adaptation” was handled, for his version is only intermittently faithful to the Greek original in linguistic details, and is for the most part quite free in changing points of form and small-scale structure.¹⁹ Speeches are abbreviated, dialogue is chopped up and made colloquial, and new phrases and images of Jeffers’s own are introduced in abundance. So although doubtless he had a copy of the Greek available for intermittent consultation, he may often have relied on his memory, and probably also employed an English translation by someone else, most likely that of Gilbert Murray.²⁰

In assessing any modern adaptation or reperformance of an old piece of music or theater, it is customary for critics to invoke the rival criteria of “authenticity” and of “equivalency” (or “letter” and “spirit”). An “authentic” production of an old play aims at replicating the exact words of the text, conditions of performance, costumes, and acting style of the original, as far as these can be achieved, and thereby at arriving as closely as possible to the author’s intentions and the experience of the original audience. Of course, this is always a more or less futile aim, since times and audiences keep changing, and the effects of this or that text or performance style inevitably change with them; but it can sometimes be worth attempting. The alternative approach is to decide instead to go for the spirit of the earlier play, to seek to recapture some of the overall impact and meaning, sometimes at the cost of radically altering the text, performance style, and costumes, even perhaps of cutting whole chunks of the “original” play (and adding others), in order to make the drama work for its new setting. Jeffers’s “adaptation” of Euripides’s *Medea*, and even more so his experiment with the story of the *Oresteia*, were clearly not intended to be literal translations or closely authentic replicas of their Greek “originals.” Neither play stipulates the use of masks, or music, or dance, as in the Greek originals.²¹ *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* has no chorus at all (only crowds of soldiers and townspeople), and in *Medea* the three Corinthian women who comprise the chorus are almost fully integrated into the action as individual characters, and are given no songs or collective opinions to offer.²² In both dramas, the dialogue is completely rewritten—and in the case of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* the actions on stage and final outcome of the drama are significantly changed from Aeschylus. But Jeffers does succeed to a remarkable degree in (re)capturing much of the impact and flavor of the “originals.” The elemental energy, violence, linguistic volatility, and emotional range of the language (without O’Neill’s clunkiness or Eliot’s flat pedantry) are very powerful—comparable in some ways to the startling and idiosyncratic visual and musical impact

of Martha Graham's *Clytemnestra*, another unusual combination of curious fidelity and outlandish freedom of creative spirit.

In general, then, Jeffers's approach to the reworking of Greek tragedies was relatively loose and unfettered. His own poetic language was never likely to be much altered or compromised by any feeling of obligation to the style of others; and the vocabulary and phraseology of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* and *Medea* are always unmistakably Jeffers's own, with few stylistic markers to indicate that the one was based on Aeschylus, the other on the (relatively much less ornate and complex) Euripides. Nonetheless it does seem appropriate to pause to consider the question, how Jeffers's overall style and tragic vision compare in general with those of each of his three great Greek predecessors. For if one refers to "Greek tragedy," one is talking in reality not only about one dramatic genre that flourished during a single century (the fifth BCE) in a single political community (Athens), with a single set of common conventions, mannerisms, and tendencies, but also about three extraordinary playwrights whose individual talents and styles are far from identical or uniform. Where does Jeffers stand in relation to Aeschylus, to Sophocles, to Euripides? Jeffers undoubtedly knew well the work of all three great Athenian tragedians; and as I observed above, his choice of the Orestes-story for his first major dramatic undertaking immediately threw him into an arena in which all three had famously already "competed," as it were, with their respective versions: Aeschylus with the three plays of his *Oresteia* (458 BCE), Euripides with his *Electra* (probably c. 420 BCE), and Sophocles with his own *Electra* (probably c. 415 BCE), to say nothing of Euripides's subsequent return to the fray with his brilliant and unconventional *Orestes* (408 BCE)—a play not often read, let alone performed, in Jeffers's time, though in recent years it has received a strong resurgence of critical and performative interest. *The Libation Bearers* (the middle play of Aeschylus's trilogy) and the two *Electra* plays comprise the one surviving case of the "same story" treated by all three playwrights, available for us to compare with one another. And as I mentioned, Euripides's play in particular draws almost explicit attention in several places to its debt to, and departures from, its famous Aeschylean predecessor.

With Aeschylus we may say that Jeffers shares the cosmic scale, the elevated language and bold, almost riotous, imagery, and the ferociously connected sense of family, breeding, and animal vitality. On the other hand, there is none of Aeschylus's social embeddedness to Jeffers's characters, little sense of a community whose families and political institutions bind them together for good and ill through thick and thin (like Aeschylus's Argos, or Athens—or even Eugene O'Neill's gossipy Middleton, let alone Sartre's oppressed and guilt-ridden Argos). Whereas

for Aeschylus, king, palace, city, gods, and cosmos interact in parallel and multilayered symmetry, and often in collusion and interdependence with one another, Jeffers's royal families in both these plays are twisted, solipsistic, and fragmented, and his heroes emerge into even more solitary isolation. Where Aeschylus's trilogy, in its concluding scenes of jury-trial and festive procession, culminates in the reintegration both of Orestes into his native Argos and of the Furies into the audience's native Athens, in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* the mob-scenes and militaristic assaults highlight repeatedly the political dissolution and moral bankruptcy of Mycenae and the hopelessness and pointlessness of seeking any kind of political or social redemption for its citizens or its ruling family. Only outside—perhaps even outside the planet Earth itself, or at least beyond the reach of its human inhabitants—and only through Orestes's mental and physical separation from and rejection of his sister and his community—can true tranquillity or peace of mind be attained.

In this respect, Jeffers's play comes much closer to Euripides, in whose plays social fragmentation, agonistic confrontations between conflicting moral principles and political interests, keen psychological introspection, and socially dis-embedded characters are the norm, rather than the exception. At the end of Euripides's *Electra*, in contrast to the triumphant returns and celebratory reintegrations of Aeschylus's third play (*The Eumenides*), Orestes is ordered to depart from Argos/Mycenae, never more to return; he is separated from his sister, and it is predicted that he will meet his end eventually in remote Arcadia—a mythological detail specifically mentioned likewise at the end of Jeffers's own play (*CP* 1: 178), in an unusually specific allusion to one of his Greek predecessors.²³

This separation, or isolation, of the major character—in Euripides's plays, partly self-imposed, as a result of the siblings' feelings of disgust and futility at their matricidal deed, and Medea's at her infanticide, but primarily the result, it seems, of a larger-scale breakdown in social relations and of an increasingly unstable and contradictory set of constraints within which each character is required to operate—is taken over and exaggerated still further in both of Jeffers's plays, to striking effect. Jeffers's Greek plays share with Euripides's a pervasive sense of paradox, of ironic revision or outright rejection of expected norms and familiar standards, a mood sharply at variance with Aeschylus's celebratory final play. Both plays end with the lead characters, Orestes and Medea, boldly asserting their individuality and complete isolation from other human contact, and each does so in terms of a departure and accession to a higher or more remote realm, pure and impersonal: "it is I that am like stone walking," states Orestes; and the narrator continues,

Orestes walked in the clear dawn;

men say that a serpent
 Killed him in high Arcadia. But young or old, few years or many, signified less
 than nothing
 To him who had climbed the tower beyond time, consciously, and cast humanity,
 entered the earlier fountain. (CP 1: 178)

Similarly Medea: "Now I go forth / Under the cold eyes of the weakness-despising stars:—not *me* they scorn" (CP 3: 197).

Aristotle famously describes Euripides as the "most tragic" of the tragedians (*Poetics* ch. 13), specifically because his endings are the most full of pathos. Yet, in several of his more pessimistic plays (among which *Medea*, *Electra*, and *Orestes* undoubtedly belong), Euripides strangely complicates the final effect by introducing a divine apparition that presents the possibility of an escape to another dimension, or a miraculous transformation of the ugly realities before us into an unexpected and fantastic alternative. Such fantastic endings (usually delivered by a "god from the machine") have produced much critical disagreement over the last century and more: some see them as ironic, unbelievable, and bitter; others as salutary and healing; others still as a disconcerting, yet highly theatrical, combination of the two. Likewise audiences and critics have debated how much comfort or moral reassurance is provided by Jeffers's endings to both his plays: the turning outward, towards the stars, and the departure of the lone individual from human company, seem to signal a new recognition on the part of these characters of a bigger pantheistic purpose or cosmic pattern to the universe (the "cold stars," the "great cold stones"), a pattern within which these characters have (at last, painfully) learned to measure themselves, and towards which in the end they are drawn.²⁴ Is this felt in any way to justify, or compensate for, the suffering and criminal actions for which they are already responsible? Has enlightenment been attained for these two? Or is the cold isolation of their departure a reassertion of the harshness and inhumanity of their situation? Like Euripides, Jeffers preserves a jarring discrepancy between the intellectual clarity and the emotional misery of his final scenes.

But it is, oddly enough, Sophocles who comes closest to the most distinctively heroic aspects of Jeffers's dramatic genius. Although Jeffers does not (as far as I am aware) adopt any of Sophocles's plot elements or linguistic mannerisms in the way that he borrows these from Aeschylus and Euripides, nonetheless it is in Sophocles's heroes and heroines that we see the closest resemblances to Jeffers's *Medea* or *Orestes*, or even his *Clytemnestra*. Pride, a hugely towering individuality and independence, a refusal to bend, to conform, to bow down to the petty standards of convention and social pressure, these are the grand and

“heroic” attributes that famously distinguish Sophocles’s *Antigone*, *Electra*, *Oedipus* (especially the old, blind *Oedipus at Colonus*), and *Philoctetes*, from their smaller-scale opponents. Perhaps Sophocles’s *Ajax* is the most Jeffersian of all, with his constant references to the unflinching pattern of the sun and stars, the seasons and crops, in contrast to the inconsistencies, compromises, and betrayals of his human enemies; indeed, several of *Ajax*’s speeches could almost have been written by Jeffers and put in the mouth of his colossally prideful and indignant *Medea*.²⁵

In this context, we are reminded once again of Nietzsche. For, in addition to the three great Athenian tragedians, Jeffers’s knowledge of Nietzsche and his celebrated *Birth of Tragedy* clearly helped to shape his understanding both of “the tragic,” and of the imagined clash between the “strength” of freely chosen morality and the “slavish” pseudo-rationalism of conventional morality and behavior, as we can observe in both the two plays we are considering. Nietzsche’s insistence on the amorality of the universe (and the “death” of god), and on the “nausea” of human contemplation of the eternally recurrent and unfeeling forces of nature, together with his notion of art as salvation from this nausea, through the Apollonian (individualistic) imposition of aesthetic order, symmetry, control, melody, and form onto the collective, undifferentiated (Dionysian) energies of nature, is strikingly similar to Jeffers’s poetic vision in many respects, as numerous critics have observed. But Jeffers’s “aesthetic” justification of the universe (“God”) is perhaps in the end more cerebral and contemplative, less participatory or integrated (less “musical”) than Nietzsche’s. For Jeffers, the solitary artist-hero does not seek to integrate himself as a part of the musical dance of the cosmos, but gazes out at it (up at the heavens, or down from his stone tower), disgusted at the human mess that confronts him, and comforted (even inspired?) instead by other forms of animate activity and bio-physical process (animals, stars, rocks, oceans, plants) that more completely embody and symbolize the pure flow of divine energy and purpose. There are precedents for this here and there in the texts of the Greek tragic poets (again, Sophocles’s *Ajax* springs to mind; or the surging imagery of nature and animals in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*); but those poets (as Nietzsche noted) build their models of “god” and “gods” and “the cosmos/fate” along human lines and largely out of human materials—even though the plays show us human lives that have gone spectacularly wrong (*Oedipus*, *Ajax*, *Agamemnon*, *Antigone*, *Phaedra* . . . the list is endless) as a result of human inability or refusal to recognize or adapt to those larger cosmic patterns. Sophocles’s heroes in particular demonstrate a kind of blindness (combined with a distinctive intransigence and independence of mind that separates them from the

conformity and moral cowardice of those around them) that the audience can observe, with mixed admiration, pity, and disapproval, as they confront the larger picture of cosmic logic (but not, Nietzsche insists, “poetic justice”) by which they are being crushed. And in this respect Medea is the most “Sophoclean” of all Euripides’s heroes, especially in her absolute revulsion at the idea of being pitied by others and her scornful sneers at “the bright Greeks,” “the rational sunlight of Greece,” so strongly reminiscent of Nietzsche’s complaints about Socratic rationalism and optimism, which he sees as having tainted and weakened the previously “strong” Greek spirit of tragedy.

Euripides was especially notorious (at least among his detractors) in the later fifth century BCE for his daring representations of female characters on the stage. And indeed, such figures as Medea, Phaedra, Electra, and Agave do indeed present extraordinarily prominent and vociferous—and often sympathetic—examples of female victimization and agency, often including extended explorations of human passions and alienation in their most extreme forms. (There is nothing comparable, it may be noted, among Shakespearean tragic heroines; nor among the female characters of the Bible.) But Euripides was in fact far from unique in this tendency: the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles likewise offer a striking number of strong and disruptive female figures, as does Greek mythology in general—doubtless another reason for modern authors’ constant borrowing from the Greeks. How significant is it that the particular tragedies Jeffers chose to adapt were precisely those in which female characters play the most dominating and disruptive roles of all? Clytemnestra (along with her Furies) and Medea are perhaps the two most famously shocking and disruptive of all the women in Greek tragedy, while Cassandra and Electra also voice and embody some of the most haunting expressions of female victimization and anguish in world literature. Is it mere coincidence that Jeffers chose these plays and these figures for his own dramas?²⁶ Jeffers himself was no feminist, but it may well be that the sharper edge of alienation, desperation, and rage that finds expression in these female victims of social and familial abuse struck him as particularly well-suited to his own representations of human passions and resentments. On the other hand, it is certainly not the case that either of these two dramas promotes any kind of feminist consciousness or critique of patriarchal authority: Jeffers’s Medea is presented as much less of a victim of Jason’s (and Corinth’s) careerist-political maneuvers than Euripides’s, and his Clytemnestra likewise never approaches the moments of insight and devastating strength to which Aeschylus’s, for all her demonic and monstrous horror, occasionally rises. In *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, it is only the young man Orestes (and before that, the male ghost Agamemnon, speaking through the

female “medium,” Cassandra) that gains insight into the world “outward”: Electra, like Clytemnestra, remains forever locked into her incestuous consciousness, and gains no escape. And in Jeffers’s *Medea*, the sense of bitterness and cruelty persists until the end: Medea may gain her revenge and demonstrate her superiority over the “bright Greeks,” but she achieves—and deserves—no true escape or enlightenment, only the grim satisfaction of having paid back her enemies.

Jeffers did indeed, it is true, choose these two plays specifically because of the roles of Clytemnestra, Cassandra, and Medea. But the choice was more the result of Jeffers’s pragmatism and old-fashioned chivalry, than of feminist sensibility, for in each case it was Jeffers’s direct personal contact with a particular female actor that impelled him to begin the work. It was Hedwiga Reicher’s visit and readings at Carmel in 1923 that prompted the writing of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*; and subsequently Judith Anderson’s participation (as Clytemnestra) in private performances of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* attended by Jeffers led to her protracted attempts to find a professional producer for that play.²⁷ When these attempts stalled, she switched her efforts to persuading Jeffers to write her a *Medea*—which he eventually did; and it was she who was able to muster the interest and support of John Gielgud and the others who contributed to the resounding success of the production. And, according to Jeffers himself, it was another distinguished actress, Agnes Moorhead, whose request at a cocktail party led him to attempt a stage adaptation of Euripides’s *Hippolytus*, so that she could play Phaedra (which in the event she declined to do) (Bennett 228).

Such responsiveness to immediate opportunities and the particular requirements of the moment has often been a key factor in the history of theatrical innovation and experiment. The presence of the right actor, or the economic incentive of a particular production opportunity, has not infrequently impelled a playwright to compose a particular piece for that particular occasion. And certainly the roles of Clytemnestra, Electra, and Medea have continued to draw some of the greatest names of the European stage throughout the twentieth century (for example, Sarah Bernhardt, Margaret Anglin, Maria Callas, Martha Graham, Melina Mercouri, Diana Rigg, and Fiona Shaw).

Although Jeffers frequently insisted that he knew nothing about playwriting and theater practice (see endnote 3), he was clearly in fact both pragmatic and quick to learn, when it came to writing for the stage. Above all, he knew that putting on an effective drama was a very different task from writing a fine or provocative poem. So, for example, he was apparently quite willing, if the occasion (and actors) demanded, to chop *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* mercilessly, to remove most of the lyric passages and most of the lines uttered by the mysterious Cassandra

(who in his original poem of 1925 is possessed for substantial stretches of time by the ghost of the dead Agamemnon, and narrates his perceptions and memories in her own voice—an intentionally disconcerting effect that is easier to follow in a narrative poem than in a performed drama).²⁸ But it would be interesting to know how the scene was played (especially by Berkeley undergraduates) in which Clytemnestra—in a brilliant but bizarre modification of the climactic moment in Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers* when she bares her breast to her son (896–930)—single-handedly keeps at bay the armed guard of Agamemnon's loyal soldiers, who are meanwhile being incited by the dying Agamemnon to attack and rape her to death. Clytemnestra flaunts her naked white body and dares any of the soldiers to attempt to violate her: "Here am I, thieves, thieves, / Drunkards here is my breast, a deep white mark for cowards to aim at . . . / See, I have no blemish: the arms are white, the breasts are deep and white, the whole body is blemishless: / You are tired of your brown wives" (CP 1: 136).²⁹ This is a fascinating scene to read and to imagine—but it is a narrative, and was not, as written, a playable scene in a public theater during the 1920s or 1930s; Jeffers's imagination at such moments was that of a lyric poet, not a practical dramatist. Likewise, Orestes's final mystical conversion and departure through the gate in *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, and Medea's preparations for departure from her Corinthian house, both seem physically rather tame—compared with Orestes's panic-stricken departure, pursued by real or imaginary Furies, at the end of Aeschylus's *The Libation Bearers*, and Euripides's spectacular use of the theater-building roof and the chariot of the Sun for Medea's aerial exit at the end of *Medea*. It is after all in the speeches and face-to-face encounters of his characters, rather than by means of other theatrical effects, that Jeffers's drama achieves its power.

Both *The Tower Beyond Tragedy* and *Medea*, as I have noted, present us with a single character whose final state of consciousness and decisive moral choice (the "path" that they end up "walking") separates them radically from the more mundane level of the other characters in the play. And in each case Jeffers takes care to present this choice as a distinct and clearly identifiable moment of self-definition. But whereas Orestes only breaks through to this new level in the final moments of the play, Medea from her first entrance—and before that, in the descriptions and anxious comments of the Nurse and Tutor—stands apart as a different kind of human being: stronger, crueller, more passionate. In Euripides, her ferocious and yet in certain respects noble characteristics (she is after all a princess, and granddaughter of a god) are associated both with her femininity and with her foreignness, and Jeffers maintains this disturbing and paradoxical characterization, while

reducing her regal bearing and heightening the sense of her unbalance and unpredictability—she seems distinctly less under control, less confident and measured in her planning, than her Greek counterpart.

Jeffers's *Medea* is an unforgettable figure, in many ways similar to Euripides's, yet combining several of the key attributes of all three of the major Greek tragedians, and especially Sophocles's. Her image-strewn language—with which she constantly likens her enemies to dogs, toads, deer, various kinds of skin-disease, filth, dregs, and slime; but herself and her loved-ones to lions, tigers, falcons, yellow-eyed predators, eaglets—is highly reminiscent of Aeschylus's choral lyrics at full throttle, while her defiant and increasingly isolated resistance to the complacency of “reasonable and civilized Hellenes” (*CP* 3: 172) stands in the direct tradition of Sophocles. But the argumentative exchanges, and her changeable moods and stinging sarcasm, ring true to the manner—and sometimes the letter—of Euripides's heroine.³⁰

Perhaps the most powerful moments of all in Jeffers's *Medea* come when the heroine rejects—with shuddering and complete contempt—the “pity” offered by those around her (i.e., her enemies: Creon, Jason):

And I will not endure pity . . .

I am not a *Greek* woman. (*CP* 3: 144)

.....

You pity me? You . . . *pity* me?

(*She comes close to him, wild with rage.*)

I will endure a dog's pity or a wart-grown toad's. May God who hears me . . . We shall see in the end

Who's to be pitied. (*CP* 3: 150)

So absolute is her conviction of moral and social superiority over them that she describes herself as a queen “of high race,” proud to be not a “common woman” but an “iron-fleshed demon” (*CP* 3: 190, 196); she has nobility and the readiness to embrace the dangers of “solitude . . . [and] wild wisdom” (*CP* 3: 145), even “annihilation . . . [and] clean bones” (*CP* 3: 163), whereas her enemies are, in the Nurse's words, “smiling chattering Greeks” (*CP* 3: 140). And although Euripides's text does indeed support such a contrast between *Medea*'s “wild” and exotic origins and the norms of Greek “civilization,” these mostly take the form of pro-Hellenic claims by Jason rather than anti-Hellenic put-downs by *Medea* herself.

Nonetheless, in this paradoxical presentation of *Medea* as the “foreign” individual of high birth and noble spirit, the “iron-fleshed demon” whose pride and contempt for the mundane and conventional separates her from all the trivial “Greeks” of the rest of the community in which she lives, Jeffers does pick up—and exaggerate—one of the most unset-

ting aspects of Euripides's original. For in Euripides's play too, it is Jason, the male Greek hero, who breaks his oaths, Jason who pragmatically calculates his profits and losses and cuts the corners of moral propriety, while mouthing conventional wisdom about civilized values and the benefits of Greek culture—while Medea, the “barbarian” princess, proves herself true to her marriage vows and guest-friend obligations, ever-insistent on her rights and unwilling to accept any compromise for herself or her children, children who are half-Jason's, whose eyes betray his look and his blood, children who must therefore be eliminated in order to preserve the purity of Medea's own continuing connection to the physical world (the “cleanness of bones”). Yet there is a striking difference between the endings of the two versions. In Jeffers's version, Medea seems ready to leave for some entirely separate realm “under the cold eyes of the stars,” while in Euripides it is to the audience's own Athens that she is headed in her snake-drawn chariot.

In *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, for much of the play it is Clytemnestra (as in Aeschylus) who dominates the scene, controlling access to the great doors of the palace and verbally outmaneuvering both her husband and the general population and soldiers of Mycenae. But at the same time, the continuing and disconcerting presence of Cassandra (embodying the ghost of Agamemnon—perhaps Jeffers's most striking innovation, and one that to some degree takes the place of the elaborate Aeschylean choral odes) constantly undercuts Clytemnestra's domination and reminds us—and her—of her imminent downfall.³¹ And it is only after Clytemnestra has been killed that Orestes begins to emerge as in any sense different or superior to the other members of his doomed family, and in particular to his sister. And in thus focusing on the brother-sister relationship, Jeffers is clearly following Euripides, not Aeschylus.

In *The Libation Bearers*, Electra takes no part in the killings and never returns to the stage during the later stages of the play. Nor does she appear at all in the third play (*The Eumenides*). Instead, the focus is entirely on Orestes and the divine entities that hunt and protect him as he is hounded around Greece (the Furies vs. Apollo and Hermes), until he is finally able to obtain acquittal and the recovery of his throne and inheritance from Athena and an Athenian lawcourt. Jeffers instead has followed a plot-line much closer to Euripides's in *Electra* and *Orestes*, in both of which we see the brother and sister clinging to one another in horror and shame after the murder, and eventually receiving a divine dispensation that takes them in very different directions.

Although critics have paid little attention to these Euripidean sources of Jeffers's inspiration for *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, they provide some fascinating insight into the creative process. For we can trace,

I suggest, a couple of striking Euripidean twists to the plots of these two plays that have contributed crucially to Jeffers's own—still highly original—ending. Both Euripidean plays employ (as does his *Medea*) a sudden and unexpected apparition of a divine figure “flying” through the air to intervene and redirect the course of the human action.³² At the end of Euripides's *Electra*, as the brother and sister stand, clinging closely to one another in shocked horror and discussing the consequences of their ghastly deed, the Heavenly Twins (Castor and Pollux, brothers of Helen and Clytemnestra) appear on high. The Chorus sees them first: “Whom do I see high over your house shining in radiance? Are these gods of the heavens? Why do they come so bright into the eyes of mortals?” (*Electra* 1233–37). Then Castor begins to speak, telling Orestes that Apollo's oracles commanding the matricide were after all “not wise,” that Orestes cannot stay in Argos, but must travel and seek purification for his deeds, and eventually found a city in remote Arcadia. Then the play concludes with this final speech from the heavenly Twins:

You will be happy, released from these distresses . . .
 We too as we move through the open valleys of air,
 we champion none who are stained with sin;
 But those who have held the holy and just
 dear in their lives, we will loose from harsh sorrow
 and save them. So let no man be desirous of evil,
 nor sail with those who have broken their oaths.
 As god to man I command you! (*Electra* 1291, 1347–56, Murray translation)

We should recall that Castor and Pollux are traditionally not only patron gods of fishermen and sailors, and the bringers of calm out of a storm, but also (at least since the Middle Ages) the astrological sign of the Gemini (“Twins”), and thus part of the regular order of physical bodies in the sky; so Jeffers's representation of Orestes's sudden mystical revelation at the end of his play may be incorporating—in radically modified form—some of these Euripidean elements:

I saw a vision of us move in the dark . . .

 the net of desire
 Had every nerve drawn to the center, so that they writhed like a full draught of
 fishes, all matted
 In one mesh . . .

 I was the stars
 Boiling with light, wandering alone, each one the lord of his own summit; and I
 was the darkness

Outside the stars . . .

.....
 no desire but fulfilled; no
 passion but peace,
 The pure flame and the white, fierier than any passion; no time but spheral
 eternity . . . (CP I: 176, 177)

The narrator continues:

Orestes walked in the clear dawn;
 men say that a serpent
 Killed him in high Arcadia. But young or old, few years or many, signified less
 than nothing
 To him who had climbed the tower beyond time, consciously, and cast humani-
 ty, entered the earlier fountain. (CP I: 178)

Orestes's transcendent vision in these closing words of Jeffers's play is obviously a far cry from Euripides's Heavenly Twins in *Electra* pontificating from on high about their own role as saviors of innocent sailors and fishermen. But the idea, and the images, seem to have been triggered in Jeffers partly by that Euripidean language and supernatural intervention. It is also not unlikely, I think, that the ending of Euripides's *Orestes* has contributed in similarly tangential manner to Jeffers's closing scene. The action of *Orestes* (a play from the later years of Euripides's career) includes a succession of unexpected twists: it begins with Orestes, intermittently mad and hallucinating from the horror of the recent matricide, and under the devoted care of his sister Electra, seeking legal and political protection from Menelaus (husband of Helen, and uncle of Orestes and Electra) against Clytemnestra's father (Tyndareus) and the people of Argos, who wish to prosecute him for murder. By the end of the play, condemned to death and feeling betrayed by all—especially Menelaus—Orestes, aided by his comrade Pylades, is reported to have captured and murdered Helen (wife of Menelaus, and sister of Clytemnestra); and he then kidnaps Hermione (the adolescent daughter of Menelaus and Helen), sets fire to the palace, and appears on the roof holding a sword at Hermione's throat and threatening to kill her too. At this absurd juncture, Apollo suddenly appears, orders everyone to stop what they are doing, and ordains a happy ending: Helen is announced not to be dead after all, but transformed into a star in the heavens:

I rise with Helen Zeus-ward, past
 The orb of many a shining star,
 Where . . . she shall rule at last,
 A goddess in men's prayers to be

For ever, with her brethren twain
 Enthroned, a great help in pain
 And queen of the eternal sea. (*Orestes* 1682–90, Murray translation)

Electra will marry Pylades; and Orestes will marry Hermione. *Exeunt omnes*, apparently cheerful and reconciled.

The play was very popular in antiquity and the Middle Ages; but by the nineteenth century its critical reputation had sagged, as it was generally regarded as bizarre, melodramatic, and “untragic.” Many critics took the intervention of Apollo at the end to be ironic and deeply unsatisfying—perhaps even a Euripidean spoof of the whole theatrical and/or religious tradition. But in an influential and thoughtful book published in 1918, Gilbert Murray argued that this final scene should not be read ironically, but rather represents a

touch of mysticism . . . What . . . befall[s] is strange and daring. An entry of a god . . . sudden and terrific, striking all beholders into a trance from which they awaken changed men. . . . The words spoken by both Menelaus and Orestes when Apollo has finished his charge, are like nothing but the words of men emerging from a trance; a trance, too, of some supernatural kind, like that which falls on the raging world in H. G. Wells’s book, *In the Days of the Comet*. Here too a raging world wakes to find itself at peace and its past hatreds unintelligible. . . . Apollo has spoken the word of forgiveness and reconciliation . . . [This play of gloom] ends with a strong, almost a mystically strong, note of peace and reconciliation. (80–82)

Whether or not Jeffers had read Murray’s book (and it is likely that he had, since it was by far the most influential study of Euripides written in English during the first 40 years of the twentieth century), it does not seem fanciful to see in Apollo’s magical roof-top rescue and enlightenment of Orestes, as a means of releasing him from the apparently overwhelming miasma of family bloodshed and political betrayal, a curious prototype for Jeffers’s description of Orestes’s mystical journey of escape “outside the stars” and “beyond tragedy.” Euripides’s Apollo, who speaks to all present on the palace roof, and Jeffers’s “life of the brown forest” (*CP* 1: 177), to which Orestes alone has spiritual access, are obviously worlds apart, both mythologically and epistemologically (as are in turn the Heavenly Twins from *Electra*). I am not suggesting that Jeffers intended a direct connection to be recognized by his readers. He may not even have been conscious himself of the resonances, as he sat in Tor House or walked over the shores of Carmel, composing his poem. But it is often from such inspired coincidences of translation and unexpected or unintended adaptation, that great poetry and arresting theater are made.³³

ENDNOTES

1. See esp. Butler, Jenkyns, and Abrams on the counterpoint between “Classical” and “Romantic” aesthetics. Among English poets, prominent nineteenth-century exponents of such Hellenophilia were Byron, Keats, Shelley, Arnold, Swinburne, Tennyson, and Browning, all of whose works were well-known to Jeffers.

2. See Jeffers, *Themes*, and, for example, Bennett; Coffin; Brophy, *Myth* and “Robinson Jeffers”; Karman, *Robinson Jeffers*. Jeffers studied Greek and Latin as a child in Switzerland and Germany; as a 16–18-year-old undergraduate at Occidental College (1903–5) he studied a wide variety of literature and philosophy, including some Greek; his post-graduate work at USC (1905–7) focused primarily on modern languages and literature; then he switched increasingly to scientific subjects (Brophy, “Robinson Jeffers” 2–3).

3. In a letter written in 1932 to the director of a stage production of *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, Jeffers refers to his “utter ignorance of the theater.” On several subsequent occasions he made clear that his decision to write specifically for theatrical performance was almost entirely the result of pressure and encouragement emanating from Judith Anderson, whose interest in his work, and personal participation in amateur productions of some of his dramatic lyrics, gradually won him over.

4. For Jeffers’s engagement with Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, see esp. Coffin; Karman, *Robinson Jeffers*; for a more skeptical assessment, see Everson.

5. Other poems and dramas based by Jeffers on Greek plays are: *Cawdor* and *The Cretan Woman* (both derived from Euripides’s *Hippolytus*); *Solstice* (based on *Medea*); *The Humanist’s Tragedy* (based on *The Bacchae*); see Brophy, *Myth* (152 n. 5). Of these, only *The Cretan Woman* (1953) was written to be performed as a play. Jeffers’s version departs much further from the Greek original than his *Medea* or even *The Tower Beyond Tragedy*, and was not a critical or commercial success.

6. A private reading of *Tower* took place in San Francisco in 1925. A staging of some kind (involving small model figures) was produced in 1926, according to Bennett; subsequently the poem was performed in various locales—and in various revisions and adaptations by other people. One of the earliest full-scale stage productions (if not the first) was performed by UC Berkeley’s Little Theatre in 1932, with Cal students directed by Prof. Edwin Duerr (on which see further n. 21 below). It was also performed (in various languages) as a radio play, staged reading, or full-scale production, in several different countries during the 1940s and 1950s.

7. Apart from the abbreviation and redistribution of the choral verses among the three chorus members, and considerable truncation of many of the longer speeches, the main structural change is Jeffers’s inclusion of the Nurse among the group who escort the children to take the gifts to Jason’s bride, so that it is she who delivers the “Messenger’s speech” describing the gruesome death of Creon and his daughter. Readers interested in comparing Jeffers’s “adaptation” with more literal English translations of Euripides’s Greek might wish to explore any of the following, all of which are relatively faithful and idiomatic (and actable) modern versions: Rex Warner (1955); Jeremy Brooks (1988); Brendan Kennelly (1991); Kenneth McLeish and Frederic Raphael (1992); J. M. Walton (London 2002).

8. Bennett slightly exaggerates the critical acclaim—the reviews were not unequivocally favorable (201–02). However, the house sold out for months on end,

and those who attended the performances were generally much more positive than those who only read the published script (such as Donald A. Stauffer in *The New York Times Book Review*, 21 Apr. 1946 [reprinted in Karman, *Critical Essays* 151–52]; or Dudley Fitts, in the *Kenyon Review* (1946) [reprinted as Fitts]). Jeffers did write several other plays and dramatic works, but relatively rarely since the 1950s have efforts been made to produce any of his works except *Medea* commercially in the theater, at least in the USA. A videotape of the 1983 Kennedy Center (Washington, DC) revival of the original Broadway production, with Zoe Caldwell as Medea and Dame Judith Anderson as the Nurse, is available on VHS (and DVD), distributed by *Films for the Humanities*. In Spring 2001 I was fortunate to see a production of Jeffers's *Medea* by the Shotgun Players (a professional Bay Area theater company), directed by Chris Blackwell, with Beth Donahue in the starring role. It was staged in the UC Theater, Berkeley (a large former movie-house), in a style that leaned heavily towards Grand Guignol, including Gothic costumes, theater organ, and emphasis on the more macabre and exotic aspects of Medea's plotting and revenge.

9. The 1932 UC Berkeley production of *Tower* had “incidental music” composed by Everett Bliss and performed by Marjorie Sachs (presumably on the piano or harp?); additional intermission music (pieces by Cesar Franck) was performed by The Ariel Trio. The 1948 acting edition of the 1946 Broadway production of *Medea* does include musical cues for tympani, horns, trumpet, oboe, harp, and Hammond organ; but they are again quite short and incidental, and none of the text is sung or danced. The 2001 Shotgun Players production of Jeffers's *Medea* did employ song for the chorus's reflective poems, but this music was a new addition (and in a somewhat eclectic style).

10. In 1950, Jeffers made respectful mention of Eugene O' Neill (“our great playwright”), alluding to the latter's possible indebtedness to Jeffers's incestuous Orestes-Electra relationship for his *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1929). But he does not (as far as I am aware) refer anywhere else to twentieth-century adaptations of Greek drama by others.

11. As evidence of the foundational and “classic” status of these two dramas in particular, it may be remarked that the recently created *Archive for Performance* . . . has so far organized two conferences, and published one volume, on the history of performance of Greek drama: the first was devoted to *Medea* (now published as Hall, Macintosh, and Taplin), the second to *Agamemnon* (conference held in Oxford, September 2003).

12. I am grateful to Alex Vardamis for bringing this article to my attention. According to Melba Bennett, Jeffers cut about 225 lines from his original *Tower Beyond Tragedy* for this stage version (224). I have not myself been able to locate a script of the 1950 acting version. For the 1932 UC Berkeley production, only minor editorial changes from the published version of 1926 were made, mainly in punctuation and breaking up of some of the long lines into shorter units (Duerr).

13. Elsewhere (in *The New York Times Book Review*, 18 Jan. 1948), Jeffers offered a slightly different angle on this universality of theme: “The story of Medea is about a criminal adventurer and his gun-moll; it is no more moral than the story of Frankie and Johnny—only more ferocious. And so with the yet higher summits of Greek tragedy, the *Agamemnon* series and the *Oedipus Rex*; they all tell primitive

horror-stories, and the conventional pious sentiments of the chorus are more than balanced by the bad temper and wickedness, or folly, of the principal characters. What makes them noble is the poetry; the poetry, and the extreme violence born of the passion.”

14. Strikingly, in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*, too, the doorway of the palace of Agamemnon (the House of Atreus) is much emphasized in the dialogue and stage action, as first Clytemnestra and then Orestes exercise their control of access to the palace, and in turn display their victims in the doorway; see Taplin, *Stagecraft* and *Greek Tragedy*. It is also notable that Aeschylus refers repeatedly to “lions,” “lion-cubs,” etc., in relation to the Argive (i.e., Mycenaean) royal family; see esp. *Agamemnon* 718–25: “A man reared a lioncub in his house, unsuckled, just as it was; / in the beginnings of its life / gentle, dear to children / and a delight to the aged. / And often he took it in his arms / like a new-born child / bright-eyed, and fawning on the hand . . . But in time it showed the temper / it had from its parents . . . with horrid slaughter . . . it made a feast unbidden / and the house was befouled with blood . . . etc.” (Lloyd-Jones). See further Peradotto, Lebeck.

15. The final stage direction reads: “She goes out of sight behind the right door-jamb, following the dead children. Jason stumbles up the steps to follow her, and falls between the two flickering lamps. The door remains open, the light in the house is mostly extinguished” (CP 3: 197). The detailed “Scene Design” for the 1946 Broadway production, with its dominating “Main Doors” and “Pillars” center-stage, is reproduced in the Samuel French edition (95). The massive lion-gate and walls of Bronze Age Mycenae, about 10 miles from Argos in the Peloponnese, were first excavated by Heinrich Schliemann in the 1870s. In Greek tragedy, the city ruled by the family of Atreus and Agamemnon is variously identified as Mycenae (Sophocles) or Argos (Aeschylus, Euripides).

16. It is also even more true of *The Cretan Woman*—itself developed out of Jeffers's earlier narrative poem *Cawdor* (1928)—which is much more freely changed in its main outlines of action and characterization than either *Tower* or *Medea*; see Coffin (235–40), Brophy, *Myth* (161–215). In this case, it should be noted that although the surviving Euripidean tragedy *Hippolytus* was clearly Jeffers's main inspiration, at least two well-known subsequent versions were also available to him: Seneca's (Latin) *Phaedra* (which drew from both of Euripides's *Hippolytus* plays, one of which was subsequently lost to posterity), and Racine's (French) *Phédre* (perhaps the most perfectly constructed and highly acclaimed of all neo-Classical dramas). A man as widely educated as Jeffers must have known both these plays well—to say nothing of Ovid's *Heroides*.

17. The collection of books at Tor House in 1967 apparently included about 30 Classical Greek texts, along with a large Greek dictionary (Brophy, “Tor House Library.”) (It is unclear how many more Greek works in English translation existed among the 2,000 or so volumes.) The dramatists reportedly occupied a prominent place among them (“sets of Greek dramas” [17]). It would be interesting to know what editions of these texts Jeffers used (with or without English or German translations? with or without critical and interpretative notes?).

18. Critics seem strangely to have neglected this Euripidean dimension in discussing *Tower*, and have focused almost exclusively on Jeffers's response to and modifications of the Aeschylean trilogy.

19. Jeffers's later account of his process of composing *The Cretan Woman* (in an interview with *The New York Times* in July 1954, quoted in Bennett [227–29]) mentions that he wrote most of the play while recuperating in an Irish hospital bed, without access to any of his books, and then completed it “during the lazy weeks of convalescence” upon his return to California. So at least in that case he does not appear to have felt the need to consult the Greek original (or even an English translation of it) at all, but rather to have relied entirely on his memory during much of the process of composition.

20. Gilbert Murray was Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford and editor of the standard Greek edition of Euripides's plays; but he was equally renowned for his verse translations of all the Greek tragedies, which were published (and many times reprinted) during the period 1890–1920, and came to be by far the most widely read and performed versions of these plays in the English-speaking world. It is worth noting that among the books in Jeffers's library at Tor House was found a copy of Murray's *Stoic Philosophy* (Brophy, “Tor House Library” 21); and Murray's theories on the origins and ritual forms of Greek tragedy (developed in tandem with Jane Harrison, Sir James Frazer, and Francis Cornford) were also highly influential and known to Jeffers. It seems on the face of it very probable that some of Murray's translations of Greek drama were indeed known to Jeffers. (He certainly did possess many copies of other European-language poetry books and plays, in addition to those in French and German that he liked to read in the original language.) But there are few similarities between the language and rhythm of Murray's old-fashioned rhyming couplets and Jeffers's long, rhymeless lines and more idiosyncratic expressions—unless perhaps there is significance to the coincidence between Jeffers's description of Medea as “a tiger” (*CP* 3: 141), since Murray twice uses “tigress” for her in the closing scene where the Greek uses the word for “lioness” (*leaina*). (Tigers were unknown to fifth-century Greeks.)

21. Jeffers (who apparently rarely attended the theater during his childhood or adolescence) makes no mention of masks, of course, for either of these two plays (esp. as *Tower* was not written to be performed). But in the UC Berkeley production of 1932, the masks were designed (by Marie Whitty) for all the actors, to signify “the anti-human aspects of the poem. Cassandra and Orestes when he sees the light, are the only characters who ever remove their masks” (Duerr, letter to Higbee). The production took place in International House above the Berkeley campus on 8–9 Nov. 1932. Jeffers did not attend; but he wrote to excuse his “hands-off attitude,” and to explain his “utter ignorance about the theater.” Una Jeffers did drive up from Carmel to attend, and wrote a letter expressing her appreciation of the “dignified and really noble production.” Duerr also remarked, “If I ever do the play again, I want to stage it in a huge place, preferably in our own outdoor Greek Theatre. Increase the crowd [of Argive soldiers and townspeople] to 100 or 200 people . . .” (This and other information about this production has been obtained by consulting the microfilm made from materials deposited by Professor Edwin Duerr in the UC Berkeley Library.)

22. In *Tower*, several aspects of the Chorus's role as observer, commentator, and adumbrator of the future are assigned by Jeffers to Cassandra (in addition to her role as mouthpiece for the ghost of Agamemnon). As for *Medea*, critics and audi-

ence have generally been very positive in their assessment of Jeffers's skill in adapting the Chorus to the requirements of a modern stage.

23. Euripides may have influenced Jeffers both in his mention here of a "serpent" that will kill Orestes (not a detail attested elsewhere in the Greek mythological tradition) and perhaps later in the final scene of *Medea*, where Jeffers discards Euripides's magic snakes drawing the chariot of the Sun, but replaces them with magic serpents spitting poison at intruders.

24. Some have seen this as an aspect of Jeffers's Nietzsche-inspired "inhumanism" (e.g., Coffin); others as a more mystical and religious impulse (e.g., Everson). I would add to these suggestions another, that Jeffers's fascination with the eternal, imperturbable, non-human symmetry of the natural world (symbolized by the heavenly bodies) owes something to Aristotle's "unmoved mover," i.e., "god" or "mind" (e.g., *De Anima*, Book 3 ch. 8).

25.

Winter's hard-packed snow
 Ceddes to the fruitful summer; stubborn night
 At last removes, for day's white steeds to shine.
 The dread blast of the gale slackens and gives
 Peace to the surrounding sea; and Sleep, strong jailer,
 In time yields up his captive. Shall not I
 Learn place and wisdom?

.....
 Strong God of Death, attend me now and come.

And yet I shall converse with you hereafter
 And know you in the world below. But you,
 Sweet gleam of daylight now before my eyes,
 And Sun-god, splendid charioteer, I greet you
 For this last time and never any more.

O radiance, O my home and hallowed ground
 Of Salamis and my father's hearth, farewell!

And glorious Athens, and my peers and kin
 Nurtured with me, and here all springs and streams,
 My nurses, you that wet the plains of Troy,
 Farewell! This last word Ajax gives to you;

The rest he keeps, to speak among the dead. (Sophocles, *Ajax* 669–73, 854–65)

26. We may recall that the other plays from which he borrowed most directly, Euripides's *Hippolytus* and *The Bacchae*, also contained prominent roles of suffering and disruptive females (Phaedra and Agaue, together with the Bacchante chorus). Of course, there are other examples of "strong" females in Greek tragedy in addition to these (e.g., Antigone, Hecuba, Deianira); but there are also several plays that lack strong female characters (e.g., Sophocles's *Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, and the two Oedipus plays; Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound*, *Seven against Thebes*). So the question of Jeffers's choice of these particular plays remains to be answered.

27. These efforts were eventually successful, in 1950. Jeffers makes clear that Judith Anderson's performance as Clytemnestra was always by far the strongest element in stagings of *Tower*, whether privately in Carmel in the 1930s, in the semi-professional Del Monte production of 1941, or the more ambitious New

York version of 1950 (Bennett 188–89, 223–26). The original inspiration for his attempting to create the poem (according to Jeffers’s “Foreword” to his *Selected Poetry*) was Hedwiga Reicher, a tall and imposing German Jewish actress, who visited Tor House in 1923 and recited some poetry: “the experience made me want to build a heroic poem to match her formidable voice and rather colossal beauty. I thought these would be absurdly out of place in any contemporary story, so I looked back toward the feet of Aeschylus, and cast this woman for the part of Cassandra in my poem” (qtd. in Bennett 113). (Does Jeffers mean “Clytemnestra” here? It is she whose “rather colossal beauty” is more prominently put on display, though certainly Cassandra’s voice too should be “formidable,” if possible.)

28. Regrettably, I have not seen the complete 1950 script, only the brief excerpt of the closing lines, specifying Electra’s impending suicide, in Bennett. The 1932 script developed at UCB actually changes very little of what Jeffers wrote, beyond the punctuation (Duerr).

29. The earlier edition of the poem contained even more explicit language (“red nipples” . . . “brown and spotted wives”). For a discussion of the erotic elements of this scene and of the mother-son confrontation, see Brophy, *Myth* (119–21, 136–39).

30. Dudley Fitts, while deploring several aspects of Jeffers’s “rather cavalier handling of his original” and “Californian [even “Hollywood”] violence,” did recognize moments of “genuinely eloquent pathos.” Less grudgingly, Brooks Atkinson praised especially his collaboration with Judith Anderson: “Since Miss Anderson is a modern, the Jeffers text suits her perfectly and releases a torrent of acting incomparable for passion and scope. Perhaps Medea was never fully created until Miss Anderson breathed immortal fire into it [*sic*] last evening.” Most enthusiastic of all the reviewers perhaps was Kappo Phelan: “Robinson Jeffers’ ‘free adaptation’ of Euripides has resulted in an astonishing collaboration: a great performance.”

31. The role of Cassandra was one that apparently caused him—and his actors—the greatest difficulty whenever the poem was adapted for stage performance (see Bennett 224–26).

32. In *The Cretan Woman*, likewise, Jeffers eschews the miraculous Euripidean elements of Artemis’s appearance and the bull from the sea. He comments, “I don’t like miracles, they distract attention from the play” (qtd. in Bennett 229). In the original Athenian productions, such divine apparitions would enter either onto the roof of the stage building, or hanging above the stage-building suspended from a crane (*mēchanē*).

33. This article is a revised and expanded version of a lecture delivered at the Robinson Jeffers Seminar on “Jeffers as Playwright” in Carmel, October 2002. I am grateful to the audience, to members of the Robinson Jeffers Tor House Foundation, to George Hart for generous editorial assistance and advice, and especially to Alex Vardamis for this invitation to speak, and for subsequent advice and encouragement.

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ROBERT ZALLER

JEFFERS AS A DRAMATIC POET
INCORPORATING THE SOVEREIGN VOICE

We think of Robinson Jeffers as a lyric poet, or as a narrative one. In the first mode he is familiar to us for his evocations of the beauty of the central California coast, and his powerful adjurations to live worthily of it. In the second he is the teller of tales of violence and incest embedded within the coastal landscape. But there is a third and no less significant genre in Jeffers, which he practiced virtually from the beginning of his career and almost up to the end. This was his dramatic verse. It is the form he gave to his longest work, "The Alpine Christ," a poem which, despite its youthful flaws, was as important to his development as any, and which, despite its unfortunate exclusion from *The Collected Poetry*, I hope we may see available again. It was also the form in which he typically cast his longer meditations on historical subjects and previous ages. These included his evocations of classical Greece in "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," "At the Fall of an Age," and in his Euripidean adaptations, *Medea* and "The Cretan Woman"; of Rome and its successors in "Dear Judas" and "At the Birth of an Age"; and of his own time in "The Alpine Christ" and "The Bowl of Blood."

These poems are all works of consequence, comparable in length and sophistication to the major narratives, and they represented a very deliberate and carefully worked-out part of Jeffers's poetic project as a whole. If we place them end to end they represent about 500 pages of verse, not much less (and in some cases more) than the entire output of many poets we construe as major. They are, moreover, both varied and innovative in form. Jeffers did not take his dramatic idioms off a rack, but pondered them deeply. Hardy was his earliest model, for "The Alpine Christ." The reworking of the *Oresteia* in "The Tower Beyond Tragedy" was one which compressed the original text in many places, extended it in others, and yoked it to Sophocles's *Electra* in fashioning an ending wholly his own. He took similar though less extreme liberties with his other Greek adaptations from *Medea* and *Hippolytus*. In "Dear Judas," his model was Japanese Noh theater, along with the verse

dramas of Yeats. "At the Fall of an Age," "At the Birth of an Age," and "The Bowl of Blood" derive from the Jacobean and Caroline masque, although "The Bowl of Blood" is the only poem Jeffers specifically characterized as such. The one dramatic form Jeffers did not draw on was the modern stage play. Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, O'Neill, and Brecht had no discernible influence on him, though there are certainly temperamental affinities with Ibsen and Strindberg. O'Neill himself was demonstrably influenced by Jeffers. Jeffers had no desire to depict original characters in domestic situations, which is the basis of the modern stage play and of our modern conception of theater as such. In this he reminds us of no one so much as Brecht, who was also attracted to Asian drama, whose work, too, was historically informed, and who shunned conventional characterization as well. (One might note, too, that Brecht and Jeffers were the only contemporaries of Adolf Hitler to represent him dramatically.) Obviously, however, Brecht and Jeffers were very far apart, if not diametrically opposed, in their conception of history and in the didactic purposes of their dramaturgy. Obviously, too, we think of Brecht primarily as a playwright, and of Jeffers not as a playwright, not really as a dramatist, at all.

Let us consider why this is the case. Firstly, most of Jeffers's dramatic works were not intended for dramatic presentation. They were literary works, meant for reading but not for performance. The Jacobean and Caroline masques were originally meant to be staged, but no one performs them nowadays, and, apart from Milton's masques, hardly anyone but scholars read them. In contrast, Elizabethan and Jacobean stage plays are still very viable as live theater. Jeffers never wrote a stage play as such. His closest approach was his adaptations of Euripides, and, of course, his version of *Medea* has been a great triumph on the stage. That isn't enough to make us think of him as a playwright, though, nor did he apparently think of himself as one either. The success of *Medea* led to the staging of "Dear Judas" in 1947, and this to the scandal of his being banned in Boston. But "Dear Judas," though it can be staged, is not a commercial property, and Jeffers's last dramatic excursus, "The Cretan Woman," attracted no interest from producers or even collegiate drama departments. There have been other efforts to stage Jeffers's dramatic work, but they have been one-off performances. If we define a playwright, or even a dramatist, as someone whose works are intended for performance, then Jeffers—the solitary instance of *Medea* aside—does not qualify. In this he is very different from Eliot, whose plays, with the exception of *Murder in the Cathedral*, are mostly a bore on stage, but which were written with performance at least notionally in mind.

We have, then, at least one reason for the neglect of Jeffers's dramatic poetry as a distinct corpus in its own right. Our modern prejudice

is to regard drama as something meant to be staged, and anything else—even if it is a work that consists solely of speeches assigned to named characters, with occasional directions for action or expression—as something else. Dramatic poetry, though common in the time of Byron and Shelley, is seldom practiced today. In Jeffers's case, it is relatively easy to assimilate the dramatic poetry to the narratives, as most critics have typically done. The narratives have characters whose speeches, occasionally broken up by authorial asides or overviews, descriptions of action, and general scene-painting, often take up the better part of the poem. If we take out these ancillary elements, we have a sub-genre rather than a fully distinct one, the dramatic poem. Of course we know that these elements are not ancillary, but crucial; nonetheless, in the dramatic poems, it is possible on a superficial view to see them simply as subtracted from the text, or compensated for by other devices. The voices of the characters remain; the voice of the author is alone suppressed.

There is another reason, too, why we tend not to focus on the dramatic poems as distinct in themselves. Those of us who admire Jeffers think of him by preference as a poet of timeless verities and values—"Permanent things are what is needful in a poem," as he says in "Point Joe," "things temporally / Of great dimension, things continually renewed or always present" (*CP* 1: 90); while the diversions of culture and the misadventures of history are mainly a cautionary tale, slight and fantastic beside "the essential reality" of natural life and cosmic grandeur. We find it salutary to be reminded of these things, and compelling to hear them said in a voice of such authority, the voice that Robert Boyers memorably described as "sovereign." Indeed, what Jeffers says, or seems to say, is so embedded in our sense of that voice, by turns minatory, commanding, and prophetic, that our sense of its truth is indistinguishable from the prescriptiveness of its tone. We can all recall favorite examples: "[T]urn right away from humanity, / Let that doll lie"; "A little too abstract, a little too wise, / It is time for us to kiss the earth again"; "Sad sons of the stormy fall, / No escape, you have to inflict and endure" (*CP* 2: 418, 409, 419). It is hard to argue with a tone like that; nor do we want to unless we are modernist critics, scandalized by anything like a poetry of direct, not to say peremptory statement. In a world whose registers seem to be only those of the huckster and the ironist, Jeffers sounds, at least to the modern ear, strangely off-key.

By definition, dramatic verse is polyphonic, a play of many voices rather than the assertion of one. No single actor can carry the whole burden of argument, or speak with a voice that stands clear of action and circumstance. None can seem to be the author without destroying the dramatic context. We will miss therefore the distinctive Jeffersian

voice that broods godlike over the lyrics and that reminds us of its presence by asserting its sovereignty in the midst of the narratives. “[S]tammer the tragedy, you crackled vessels,” Jeffers says in the middle of *The Women of Point Sur*, speaking imperatively both to his characters and of them to us. In “Give Your Heart to the Hawks” he seems to offer a kind of absolution to Lance Fraser in advance of the torture he will inflict on him, playing on the distinction between an Old and a New Testament deity while offering a Nietzschean overview that transcends both:

Oh ignorant penitents,
 For surely the cause is too small for so much anguish.
 To be drunk is a folly, to kill may call judgment down,
 But these are not enormous evils,
 And as for your brother, he has not been hurt.
 For all the delights he has lost, pain has been saved him;
 And the balance is strangely perfect[.]

 Surely it is nothing worse to be slain in the overflowing
 Than to fall in the emptiness;
 And though this moon blisters the night,
 Darkness has not died, good darkness will come again;
 Sometimes a fog will come in from sea,
 Sometimes a cloud will crop all the stars. (CP 2: 328–329)

Sometimes Jeffers, again like a god, will reject his own creation; he leaves Walter Margrave at the end of the poem that bears his name with the remark that “to speak of his thoughts and the abject / Horror” as he faced execution “would be to insult humanity more than it deserves,” and he dismisses another hero, Bruce Ferguson, as one “[w]ho bawled for the truth, the truth, and failed to endure / Its first least gleam” (“For Una”) (CP 2: 170; 3: 35). Sometimes he will cut down a character who seems too big for his britches; when he describes Reave Thurso as “a little laughably god-like” as he rides along a ridge, we know that he is in for a terrible fall. In a Jeffers narrative, there is room for only one god.

In technical terms, we may describe Jeffers’s resort to the authorial voice as a distancing effect. Its purpose is typically to make us withdraw from too close an identification with character and action, and to make us consider a larger perspective. Jeffers’s narrative skill is such that he can do this without diminishing the impact of his story; his observation that Lance Fraser should suffer less anguish over killing his brother does not mean that he will suffer less, or that his suffering will be less morally or dramatically imposing. On the contrary, the tension between the Olympian serenity of Jeffers’s authorial counsel and the ineluctable subjectivity of Fraser’s experienced guilt deepens the pathos of the latter for us, and makes us feel it all the more keenly.

This should tell us something about the ambiguity of the Jeffersian “voice.” In the case of “Give Your Heart to the Hawks,” we are not meant to take it at face value, because if we did—if we decided that filicide was no great matter in the grand scheme of things, and that Lance had even done his brother a favor by sparing him the inevitable pains and disillusionments of life—we would have no reason to go on reading a poem about a man who not only refuses to be absolved or consoled on any level but insists on inflicting Promethean tortures on himself. If, indeed, we consider the change of register at the end of the passage, with its evocation of a consoling darkness, we sense a compassion profoundly at odds with its prevailing tone of stoic detachment. The more closely we examine the authorial voice in Jeffers, the more complex, conflicted, and even contradictory it seems—in short, the more multivocal, or, to put it another way, the more dramatized.

Sometimes this drama takes the form of self-interrogation or self-reproach. In the well-known “Love the Wild Swan” (*CP* 2: 410), an initial voice, set off in quotation marks, rejects the craft of poetry, at least as practiced by the speaker: “I hate my verses, every line, every word. . . .” This voice is answered, antiphonally, by another, which probes the root of its complaint: “Does it matter whether you hate your . . . self?” The second voice—not a second persona, but only the original one replying to itself—counsels the speaker to “love” the wild swan of the world’s beauty even if it lies beyond description or praise. The injunction to love outward is such a familiar theme in Jeffers that we may be startled to find the poet apparently applying it to himself. Must Jeffers even remind himself to admire a sunset? The issue, though, is not the wild swan, but the speaker’s attempt—failed, when he examines it—to forget himself in aesthetic contemplation. “And you are a maker of verses,” the speaker of “Second-Best” says to himself in a tone of scorn, adding that “The pallid / Pursuit of the world’s beauty on paper, / Unless a tall angel comes to require it, is a pitiful pastime” (*CP* 2: 132). This Rilkean angel is obviously an inner imperative, but one figured as retrojected on the external world. The problem, then, is not merely the inadequacy of words to describe the beauty of things, but the much deeper and more troubling question of how to distinguish the poet’s sensibility from the world itself: how, that is, to resolve the Kantian question of whether the world is knowable at all. This question dogs Jeffers continually, and we sense that the more he insists on the beauty of the world and the value of its process, the closer his doubt about both comes to the surface. The sovereign Jeffers voice, it seems, is insecure even in its most didactic pronouncements.

Dialectic, the self-division of the poetic voice to argue a problem or to express a conundrum, is a familiar device in the lyric and meditative

poems. "Meditation on Saviors," "Self-Criticism in February," "The Blood-Guilt," and "Cassandra" are notable examples, in addition to the poems already discussed. The dramatic poem "Dear Judas" (*CP* 2: 5–44) is largely a dialectical conversation between Jesus and Judas, one that extends the self-interrogation of "Meditation on Saviors." Jesus has "loved outward," according to the prescription in the latter poem, and, trumping the speaker of "Second-Best," he claims to "have seen the angels of God." More, he claims to have seen God himself, "lovelier," as he says, "than the desert dawns" (27, 29). This experience both enhances and annihilates the ego, so that Jesus finally identifies himself with the Father. Since the Father is all, however, he may be spoken of only in the persona of the Son, and Jesus so represents himself to Judas.

Judas, on the other hand, is wedded to humanity—to Jesus's humanity above all, for he loves him, not only as one suspects physically, but as one who completes his own being. When Jesus attempts to soar beyond his humanity, as the Reverend Barclay and Jeffers's other great over-reachers do, Judas feels abandoned and betrayed, and finds his excuse in a pity for the disciples Jesus is about to expose to martyrdom to betray him in turn. What affronted the audiences in Boston, one suspects, was not only the portrait of a flawed and ultimately self-deluded Jesus, but of a relatively sympathetic Judas whose argument—that suffering is the worst evil, and that to wilfully augment it is therefore the worst of sins—is by no means trivial. The price of transcendence, as Jeffers notes in "Meditation on Saviors," is always suffering; taken upon oneself, it is a moral choice, but, risked for others, a dreadful presumption. At the same time, however, the pity Judas affirms for those to whom Jesus will bring suffering is in itself a presumption, for it would reduce life to the mere avoidance of pain. What Jesus offers his followers is both deluded and heroic, for although his identification of himself with divinity is absurd on its face, it is tragic as well in its unwitting mimicry of the divine agon whose full disclosure awaits us in "At the Birth of an Age." Jesus is both right and wrong, as Judas is also both right and wrong, albeit on the lesser scale of value; and therefore there can be no resolution of the dialogue between them, but only its fated repetition to the end of time. That dialogue in turn is also Jeffers's intimate conversation with himself, no longer expressed as self-bifurcation but as characterization. Divided voice and divided consciousness thus become the seedbed of drama.

God the Father is necessarily absent from "Dear Judas," but the rejected mother, Mary, dominates the last scene of the drama, at first exulting in what she believes will be her son's triumph and then realizing that she has betrayed him far more deeply than Judas: "I am that woman: the giver of blood and milk to be sacrificed." One might say

otherwise, too, that Jesus has courted destruction by denying the maternal archetype and thereby, like the Orestes of "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," leaving himself exposed to the Furies. It is striking in any case that in most of Jeffers's dramatic works, and all of those from Greek sources, the protagonist is a woman, and sometimes the antagonist as well. Clytemnestra dominates "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," braving Agamemnon's bodyguard and the townspeople of Argos in a scene greatly expanded from the Aeschylean original, and the only character strong enough to oppose her is the captive seer Cassandra, whose role is built up from even scantier materials. When Clytemnestra is slain, her place is taken by the Oedipal surrogate Electra, who inherits her mother's thirst for power if not quite her animal fierceness, and from whom Orestes escapes only by consummate effort to win an equivocal peace with himself. Orestes is taken for the ultimate hero of "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," but if he is the first male figure in Jeffers to escape Oedipal destruction, it is only by a blood-immersion that leaves him symbolically castrated and able to seek refuge, like the Young Man in "The Alpine Christ," only on the heights of the sublime.

Clytemnestra and Mary are maternal archetypes, but the Helen of "At the Fall of an Age" (CP 2: 420-84) is something else, the eternal feminine who, ageless and childless, can only be queen and sacred prostitute. Her perfect beauty, like that of Jesus, is formed for destruction and sacrifice, and what she is sacrificed to by the embittered Rhodian princess Polyxo is history, the supersession of the old Mycenaean world by the new classical one. Helen is the living death of Mycenae, surrounded by a guard of slain warriors, the last survivor of the holocaust ignited by her innocent and irresistible glory and therefore the final passage to rebirth. Polyxo is her destined judge and assassin, but she too knows that she is playing a role that will consume her, and there is a kind of exquisite courtesy in the ritual they enact—very much like that of Jesus and Judas, although the currency of dialogue is not that of thwarted love but, on Polyxo's part, of inveterate hatred. The theme of sacrifice is, of course, one that runs through all of Jeffers, but whereas in the narratives a complex emplotment and a gradual unfolding of tragic consciousness is necessary to stage the ultimate result, the verse dramas, with their prefabricated mythical or historical characters and their prescribed outcomes, can proceed more swiftly and economically to the denouement. Greek tragedy itself, of course, proceeded in the same way, since the plots and protagonists used by the tragic playwrights were, by convention, tales many times told. Occasionally the narratives use the armature of tragic plots—"Cawdor" and "Solstice," for example—but, although it is the narratives that are usually compared (for good or ill) to Greek tragedy, it is really the verse dramas that more closely

approach the classical prototype, not only in the obvious sense of being adaptations, but in their often static grandeur. If the narratives are, in a sense, verse novels, then the verse dramas are, in their severe and liturgical voice, oratorios.

The last of the verse dramas, *Medea* and "The Cretan Woman," are, respectively, an adaptation of Euripides's tragedy specifically commissioned for stage production, and an actable version of the same author's "Hippolytus," with Phaedra as the chief protagonist. Jeffers's *Medea* is descended from the Clytemnestra of "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," who defies the patriarchal code with the chthonic powers of the female archetype. Clytemnestra, braving the townsmen of Argos in the aftermath of Agamemnon's murder, resorts finally to exposing herself. She associates her body with the Oedipal sublime of Helen, and though admitting that she cannot claim the beauty of her Trojan sister, she contrasts her white and unblemished body with the "brown wives" of the townsmen. The stratagem is successful, though only the timely arrival of her lover Aegisthus keeps the mutinous crowd at bay. Clytemnestra's situation is superficially similar at least to that of Helen in "At the Fall of an Age," who also faces death before a crowd; but Helen, refusing to exploit her beauty, appeals only to the hospitality of a merciless enemy. It is precisely this natural restraint that makes that beauty most manifest to us, and with it the aspect of the female archetype she represents: the perfection of form that intimates the sublime. The Myrmidons salute her as the "wild swan," the term Jeffers applies to the world's beauty as such in "Love the Wild Swan." Since that beauty is contained only in the totality of natural process and not in any single manifestation, Helen's identification with it is partial and transitory—indeed, the point of "At the Fall of an Age" is precisely that such beauty, belonging ultimately to the temporal manifold, must be consumed and sacrificed to be renewed. Nonetheless, it is of defining importance. If the function of Jeffers's male protagonists is, directly as in the figure of Jesus or indirectly in those of the narratives, an *imitatio dei*, that of the female archetype is to suggest the divine manifestation in the phenomenal world. Beauty is the face that God permits us to see, and our response to it is the ground of our worship.

This is not all, however. The female archetype has other registers, other voices. Clytemnestra's imperfect beauty is admixed with cunning, and it descends into the lower realms of power where history, as it were, takes the torch from myth. Helen rules men so directly and imperatively that it would be pointless for her to seek any other kind of power: that men fight for her, blinded to anything else, renders her majestically passive. Clytemnestra, however, takes command of Argos as a queen, and rules it with craft. This kind of power is deeply suspect, because it is

both bound up with sexuality—as Jeffers makes explicitly clear in the scene between Clytemnestra and the townsmen—but also with Oedipal dominion, as her displacement of Orestes reveals. Because women have the power of generation, the removal of the father annuls the son as well, leaving room only for the gelded paramour Aegisthus. This is why the patriarchal deities require vengeance of the reluctant Orestes; it is only in this way that both he and they can regain not merely power but what is even more fundamental, identity.

Helen of Troy thus appears as a force of nature, but Clytemnestra as an invader of male precincts. Men can never kill a Helen—that is left to the embittered old woman, Polyxo—but Clytemnestra's death is demanded lest masculine power (which is simultaneously aroused and captivated by Helen) be annihilated altogether. Medea, however, is another case. Though a princess in her own realm, she gives up title and authority to become the wife of the foreign adventurer Jason, and in his land she has only such status as he accords her. When Jason disavows her and persuades Creon to send her into exile, bereft even of her own children, the female archetype is thrown back on its last and most dangerous resource: the chthonic powers that come from woman's fundamental association with the earth. If Helen represents a kind of sky-goddess, the personification of the natural sublime, Medea is her antithesis, the earth mother outraged in her lair. Jason thinks that by forcing her into the open, into exile, he will neutralize her powers, but he only sharpens them instead. The result is a devastation of the man-made order that is far more complete than Clytemnestra's mere usurpation of it.

At the same time, Medea does not exist on a mythic level alone; she would be very dull as a character if she did. As the Trojan War testifies to the power female beauty exerts over the whole of civilization, so Medea's elopement with Jason, her betrayal of home and family, and her willingness to be societally defined by Jason alone, signify the power of male attraction as well. Medea has given up neither her pride nor her powers, but in voluntarily subjecting them to Jason she acknowledges the wider world that can be had by the free union of man and woman. When Jason repudiates this union and seeks to deny her its fruit, she reassumes her powers in their most archetypal mode and destroys all she has made. Euripides emphasizes those powers and their connection to chthonic mysteries, but Jeffers is more interested in the question of pride and its concomitant, final isolation. Pride—"the bird with the dark plumes," as Jeffers called it in an earlier poem (*CP* 1: 402)—is the standing temptation of all solitary natures, and the one he rebuked most often in himself. His Medea is triumphant but shattered as well, and her final assertion of invulnerability—that it is not she the "weakness-

despising” stars will scorn—is as close as her nature permits to tragic confession. Like the male protagonists of the mid-period narratives, Cawdor, Thurso, and Fraser, she internalizes pain and immures herself within it; unlike them, and more like the deity they unconsciously aspire to, she will bear it, and, as Cawdor says, “strain the iron forever.”

If Helen is an incarnation of the sexual principle the Greeks identified with Aphrodite, and Medea a figure poised somewhere between divinity and humanity, Jeffers’s Phaedra, the last of his dramatic heroines, is the study of a woman in the toils of a passion that, unreciprocated, can only torment and humiliate—a woman, in short, fully humanized, who can call on no divine power for pity or aid. One of the things, indeed, that attracted Jeffers to Greek culture was its absence of prayer. Gods had to be propitiated lest they feel angry and dishonored, but those they favored were arbitrarily chosen. It was only with Calvinism that this idea was reinstated at the heart of Christianity, and then but briefly. As Jeffers was in this sense the heir of the Greeks, so he was Calvinism’s only major poet.

In “The Cretan Woman,” the most fatal of all deities, Aphrodite, has been angered. Phaedra, her victim, has neglected her shrine, believing Eros fulfilled in the love she bears for her husband, Theseus. This is a form of pride, for it is hubris to believe that instinct can be confined by reason and will—the same mistake that King Pentheus makes in “The Humanist’s Tragedy,” Jeffers’s brief narrative retelling of another Euripidean tragedy, *The Bacchae*. Like Pentheus, who is torn to pieces by the wild female servants of Dionysos, the Bacchantes, Phaedra is the supreme product of ancient civilization—“the most highly cultured family in Europe,” as her waiting-woman boasts. The passion Aphrodite ignites in her for her stepson Hippolytus not only mocks her marriage vows with incest, but uncovers her own suppressed hatred for Theseus. “The Cretan Woman” is, on a psychological level, a study in the disintegration of personality and the underlying truth it reveals, but it is more importantly about the abasement of pride. In *Medea*, pride is unvanquished because, in the killing of her children, humanity is overcome. What wins out in her in the end is the savagery of a wolf, or of a goddess, and we remember her inseparable connection to the earth deities. Phaedra is only a woman, not the embodiment of an archetype but the victim of it. When a goddess possesses her, she is not exalted but destroyed.

With “The Cretan Woman,” Jeffers came to the end of one aspect of his poetic project, the depiction of the female principle in all its aspects and manifestations. For this, the dialogic-dialectic method of the drama served him better than any other, for while in portraying male protagonists he was concerned to establish the external aspect of his monistic

theism, the God beyond phenomena, in his female ones he considered the internal one of the God within phenomena. Put a bit differently, Jeffers was interested in the distance between man and God, but also in the connection between women and natural process. In the end, the God beyond natural process was the same as the God within it, for God was the One and the All: nothing existed outside him. But the perfect unity of divine monism could be experienced only by the actual Creator; to speak of him and of the world that was also him required a dualistic language. Jeffers found it, as many before him, in the language of gender. That language is out of fashion nowadays, and it may be one reason Jeffers himself has been as well. But it has served many purposes honorably, and if we wish to pursue our deepest intuitions of the self and the world we will, one way or another, have to find our way back to it.

This brings us to the one classical verse drama we have not yet considered, "At the Birth of an Age." It formed part, with "Dear Judas" and "At the Fall of an Age," of the most ambitious and programmatic enterprise Jeffers ever undertook, a trilogy designed to depict what he took to be the three critical junctures of Western civilization, the Hebraic, the Greek, and the Christian-Teutonic. "Dear Judas," of course, represented the Hebraic, because Jeffers always conceived of the historical Jesus—as opposed to the superimposed "Christ"—as a Jewish figure, a point recent scholarship has begun to emphasize. "At the Fall of an Age," as we have seen, traces the transition point between the rough-hewn, archetypal culture of myth that Jeffers associates with Mycenaean Greece and the Apollonian strain of classicism. Jeffers perceived the Christian-Teutonic moment as a creative regression to a pre-Hellenic barbarism, dependent for its emergence on the collapse of the Roman civilization that had carried Greek values to their final decadence.

"At the Birth of an Age" is a saga of bloodshed and vengeance whose protagonist, Gudrun, is another fierce Jeffers heroine. When, realizing what vengeance has cost her, she commits suicide, she is granted the blinding vision of "[T]he hanged God that my childish blood loves." Jeffers calls this personage "The Young Man," the name he had given the protagonist of "The Alpine Christ" nearly 20 years before. He is, in fact, the posthumous Jesus, as his references to "the waters of Palestine" and "Golgotha" make clear. In Jeffers's thought, he is the figure who comes closest to the perception of the panentheistic God who both creates the universe and is embodied in it, but his vision, too, is partial, and corrupted by the bitterness of human longing. In our terms of reference, if Gudrun perceives the "hanged God" in his aspect of beauty, Jesus sees him as relentless and intolerable force, "Oh merciless / God not my father." Their visions are succeeded by those of unidentified "Singers"

who finally dissolve in broken fragments and interjections—the collapse of human drama as such—and then by “Inhuman Voices” that echo the phases and aspects of natural process itself. It is only at the end of this version of the *Paradiso* (but one that, unlike Dante’s, incorporates an *Inferno* and a *Purgatorio* as well) that Jeffers, in his most daring poetic move, introduces the Hanged God directly, the consciousness that endures eternally beyond the stars and tortures itself to division and sentience. Here is the sovereign voice at its fullest reach, attempting to encompass no less than the mystery of being, yet offering a final vision of indeterminacy. The cosmologists tell us the present state of our knowledge allows for two possible outcomes to our universe: that space will permanently disappear into the black hole from which it emerged, or that the world will ceaselessly regenerate itself. Jeffers’s God offers us the same choices, but as acts of will: “I have not chosen / To endure eternally; I know not that I shall choose to cease; I have long strength and can bear much” (*CP* 2: 483).

Commenting on the Hanged God’s speech, William Everson says: “The stretch and magnitude of his attempt are the signature of Jeffers’s place as a visionary poet-prophet and mystic subsumed in the calling of one who, however he sees and however he feels, is nothing unless he can at last find voice, aware as he is that, in the presence of such magnitudes, to utter is to fail” (*Excesses* 80). The many voices of Robinson Jeffers’s verse dramas, the broken voices of those who fail before beatitude, climax in this epiphanic revelation—the revelation that, before the mystery of Godhood and of being, there is finally no certainty except that the One is All and the All is One.

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