

The *Niobe* Project

For four weeks in September, 2011, twenty-two students from Lewis & Clark College, Portland, Oregon, worked on **The *Niobe* Project** at the International Center for Hellenic and Mediterranean Studies, Athens, as part of the Attic Tragedy in Translation course. They were divided into two groups of eleven; one group was given the surviving fragments of Aeschylus' *Niobe* (40 lines in total, some damaged) while the other group was given the surviving fragments of Sophocles' *Niobe* (some 36 usable lines, plus some scraps of testimonia).¹ Their brief was to create a play about Niobe based on or inspired by and incorporating (most of) the fragments they had been given. The groups worked separately and did not see each other's work until public performance, which took place on September 29th with the audience of College Year in Athens students and faculty being invited to vote for the best play.²

The story of Niobe's transformation into stone is found in *The Iliad*: Inviting Priam, father of the slain Hector, to eat, Achilles says,

“We are told
that even Niobe in her extremity
took thought for bread – though all her brood had perished,
her six young girls and six tall sons. Apollo,
making his silver longbow whip and sing,
shot the lads down, and Artemis with raining
arrows killed the daughters – all this after
Niobe had compared herself with Leto,
the smooth-cheeked goddess. ‘She has borne two children,’
Niobe said, ‘How many have I borne!’
But soon those two destroyed the twelve.

“Besides,
nine days the dead lay stark, no one could bury them,
for Zeus had turned all folk of theirs to stone.
The gods made graves for them on the tenth day,

¹ In Greek and in English translations, from the Loeb editions by Alan Sommerstein and Hugh Lloyd-Jones respectively.

² In announcing the contest to the audience, I stressed that there were no given criteria for judgment. This seemed the best – or perhaps the only – way of modelling the original competition between tragedians at the City Dionysia, since we do not know what the criteria for judgment were at that event.

and then at last, being weak and spent with weeping,
Niobe thought of food. Among the rocks
of Sipylus' lonely mountainside, where nymphs
who race Achelous river go to rest,
she, too, long turned to stone, somewhere broods on
the gall immortal gods gave her to drink.”

(*Iliad* 24: 602-17: Translated by Robert Fitzgerald.)

[*In the tragedies, Niobe has seven sons and seven daughters.*]

While the surviving fragments of both ancient tragedies are very sparse, they are sufficient to get a fair idea of the two tragedians' very different treatments of the story.

Aeschylus begins his play after the slaughter of Niobe's fourteen children by Apollo and Artemis has occurred. Niobe has been grieving mutely for some days. Her father Tantalus arrives and at some point in the action following this she breaks her silence and speaks.

Sophocles, very differently, dramatizes the killings. In the first phase, Apollo's shooting of the seven sons is relayed to Niobe via a messenger speech. In the second phase, the dramatist ratchets up the shock-horror by having Apollo and Artemis arrive onstage and continue their mission there, Artemis shooting the daughters while Apollo urges her on.³ It seems that Sophocles may also allow one daughter, Chloris, to survive.

One goal of **The Niobe Project** was to explore the difference in 'tragic effect' of these two different ways of dramatizing the story, the one focusing on the post-traumatic mourning process, the other on the actual events constituting the 'reversal of fortune'. To this end, both groups were also given Plato's criticism (*Republic* 380a) of two lines from Aeschylus' *Niobe* – “When god wishes to ruin a family completely, he plants a cause among its members” [trans. Sommerstein] – for implying that the gods are malevolent, and Ovid's treatment of the story (*Metamorphoses* 6) where Niobe's boasting is seriously 'over the top' and clearly culpable. The groups were invited to explore the ways in which the degree of fault or blame attaching to Niobe herself, from none to a great deal, affected the tragic effect. Sappho's suggestive fragment 142 – “Niobe and Leto were bosom friends [*hetairai*]” – was also provided for the twist it gives to the relations between mortals and gods, relations which are much at stake in the story.

³ This does not imply that the deaths were enacted onstage. It appears that Artemis shot from the roof into the house represented by the *skene*, such that she was visible but her victims were not.

The version after Aeschylus

The key question raised by the Aeschylean fragments is, what is it that finally provokes Niobe to speak? And what does she say? It seems likely that her father Tantalus, who, learning of the catastrophe, has journeyed from Lydia, is instrumental in this.

Aeschylean silences, though mocked by Aristophanes, are great experiments in the specific power of drama. The utterance that follows must be the *meaning of that silence*, not just eloquent words.

The students chose to treat Niobe's first utterance as the dramatic climax of their play. The one fragment (fr. 162) attributed to Niobe on the evidence of Strabo, was not suitable for this.⁴ Instead, Niobe was given the unattributed fr. 161 as a fitting summation of the tragic finality of her plight: "Alone of the gods, Death desires no gifts; one can gain nothing by making sacrifice or pouring libation to him, nor has he any altar, nor is he addressed in songs of praise; from him, alone among divinities, Persuasion stands aloof." [Trans. Sommerstein]

It seemed to the group that Niobe's utterance, after so long a silence, could not be understood as wholly motivated or provoked by Tantalus' appeals to her. Rather, it was the outcome of a complex internal process, with her father's efforts providing no more than a trigger. To represent this process Niobe was given three 'manifestations'. That is, three other performers representing her anger, her grief and her confusion could speak her thoughts and feelings. As they did so, the audience would continue to 'read' Niobe's silence both in her own 'stony' demeanor and in the way Tantalus continued to behave towards her as if she were mute. Initially, the manifestations spoke separately, but after a time their monologues were cacophonously superimposed. This proved an effective way of 'dramatizing' the silence, without losing any of the climactic effect of Niobe's actual utterance.

The manifestations were closely associated with Niobe in a tableau at the start of the play, with each relatively discrete in a pose expressing her particular mood. After Niobe spoke, they merged with her into a single rock-like 'body-sculpture'.

In articulating her inner monologues, the manifestations of Niobe appeared as a kind of chorus, albeit only three-strong. This left the actual chorus, presumed made up of local slave women, somewhat stranded – at least in the part of the performance when the manifestations were active and vocal. Perhaps more could have been made of an implicit 'opposition' (of a theatrical, not a dramatic, kind) between the manifestations and the chorus. In ancient tragedy, choruses do not tend to be seen as *extensions* of a character, even where they are strongly supportive of, or friends, servants or followers of that character. The Greek chorus maintains a separate

⁴ "Those who are near of kin to the gods and close to Zeus, whose altar of Ancestral Zeus is high in the upper air on the crags of Ida, and in whom the divine blood has not yet lost its potency." [Trans. Sommerstein]

identity, in which it is usually as uninvolved as involved.⁵ Precisely in the space that opened up between that traditional chorus and the chorus-like manifestations (which, like a (mobile) Noh chorus, spoke on behalf of and ‘in the voice of’ the character), an intriguing set of theatrical questions, and possibilities, arose – which simply couldn’t be followed up in the time available.

The chorus-like manifestations may not be an ‘authentic’ feature of Attic tragedy, but they lent an aesthetic formality to the performance that was strongly analogous with the original genre.⁶

The version after Sophocles

Clearly Sophocles’ play contained much more plot than Aeschylus’ and the basic problem was how to model this without knowing, except in outline, what that plot was.

The solution found was to tell the story three times, with variations. In the first, Niobe is culpably boastful; in the second, the gods misunderstand her behaviour (being given a misleading message); and in the third, Apollo and Artemis are wholly vindictive following only the slightest provocation. Chloris is allowed to survive only in the second version. Apart from increasing the ‘amount’ of plot (for the action had to move forward at pace), this device effectively a) reflected the uncertainty of reconstruction, and b) prompted thought about the relationship between the protagonist’s agency/responsibility/culpability and the tragic effect.

To incorporate three versions of the story in a single play, the students decided to use a modern chorus of tourists visiting Mt Sipylus in Turkey, the site of the weeping rock of Niobe. Different tourists had heard different versions of Niobe’s story, and as they narrated each of these it became enacted and took over the performance space. The figures of Apollo and Artemis remained onstage throughout, however – but obviously disconnected from the tourists – in a way that gave the divine part in the play precisely more ‘presence’ than something merely called up by the narratives as and when required.

There was much debate both before and after the performance as to how different such a chorus was from the choruses of Attic tragedy. On the one hand it represented the modern audience by proxy in the way that original choruses must have done – and that more effectively than could a chorus that seemed ‘ancient’. Moreover, after prompting the enactment of each version of the story in its story-teller mode, it took on the role of witnessing and reacting to events (a role that combines both focusing and amplifying the action) that is surely fundamental to the original genre. On the other hand a group of tourists does not constitute ‘many bodies with *one* identity’ as a true chorus does; its implicitly more divided status was also made

⁵ There are exceptions to this, but such as ‘prove the rule,’ for example *Trojan Women*.

⁶ There was some similarity, in fact, with Giorgos Zamboulakis’ approach to the theatricalization of the fragments of Euripides’ *Cretans*, as performed on September 11 and 12, 2011, as part the Ancient Drama Festival of Athens. Zamboulakis extended the stage presence of certain characters with their ‘system,’ comprising other performers – in Pasiphae’s case, seven of them.

explicit by its differences of opinion about the story being told.⁷ Lastly, it was not appropriate (or perhaps not easy) for such a tourist-group, presented quite naturalistically, to perform anything like a choreographed *stasimon*. Even so, in the overall structure of the play there was an alternation of choric commentary/debate and enactment of versions of the story that reflected the rhythm of Attic tragedy.

Naturalistic treatment of the chorus entailed natural contemporary choric speech. The group preferred to extend a relatively modern idiom to the characters in the action too, to avoid any jarring contrasts. This entailed that the fragments, as incorporated in the text, did not stand out. Fragmentariness, thus, was not acknowledged at the textual level, though it was inscribed in the uncertainty as to plot.

Nonetheless such verbal homogeneity was not enough in itself to meld the two 'sides' of the play (modern chorus and ancient story) into a sufficient unity. This was achieved by having one member of the chorus become so involved in the story, more precisely the last version of it, that she was witnessing that she became literally absorbed in it. That is, identifying with Chloris who, strangely, seemed to notice her too, she entered the space of the action and disappeared into the palace where Chloris was killed. This went 'unnoticed' at the time, that is, by other chorus members, but at the end of the play the tour guide, leaving with the group, simply commented that someone seemed to be missing. Apart from providing a necessary bridge between the play's polarities, this device reflected interestingly on the complex interplay of empathy and distance in an actual ancient chorus, and even on the audience's own experience of 'involvement' in the action, which, in Attic tragedy, choruses serve to model.

And the winner was...

... the version after Sophocles, by a single vote!

⁷ Actual ancient choruses sometimes divide, of course, not simply into hemi-choruses but by dissolving into a group of individuals, as most famously in *Agamemnon* when the king's death-cry is heard from the palace. But this is temporary.