

H of H Playbook by Anne Carson

What an interesting mind Anne Carson possesses. I imagine it as an Alice in Wonderland landscape, filled with classical buildings where, on second glance, something is just so lightly off: a shattered Doric column holding up a building, an agora with a kiosk in a far corner, lit by a neon sign proclaiming “Medusa Hair Concepts”. And books, everywhere, lying open, piled atop one another, and literary refugees like Victor Serge, Percy Shelley, Herman Melville and Jane Austen huddling with Jim Morrison and the Doors around a dumpster fire. Characters from Greek tragedies would pass each other, nodding vaguely, racking their brains to recall the name. All of it, eras, stories, myths, would be mixed up together into a spinning kaleidoscope of images. That’s how Carson treats the Greek plays she translates, as vessels in which she stirs in elemental concoctions of the contemporary and the classical, the high and low arts, and fields from novels to political polemics, into a magical brew. Carson is a subversive working in a liminal space she has created. As a poet, she subverts notions of register and symmetry. As a translator of Greek drama, she retains the skeleton of a work while re-fleshing the body with parts that shouldn’t fit but somehow do. In her unwillingness to toe the party lines of either pedantic poetry or assiduously faithful translation, she is the Dr. Frankenstein of current western literature.

H of H Playbook is an odd, compelling treatment of Euripides’ *Herakles*, retrieved from 436BCE and dropped in a heap of impressionistic drawings and text fragments in a manner very century 21. Carson, a Canadian poet who teaches classical Greek, has been for many years the foremost translator of Greek drama into English. Her translations surge with energy, and resonate even when the cries of the protagonists are left in Greek, as they are in her *Elektra*. Her work leaps off the page for actors in a way translations seldom do; she has formed a close collaboration with CSC Rep, an Off-Broadway theatre in New York, long famous for alternative readings of classic plays. (I cut my teeth there as an actor at the beginning of my career.) A winner of the MacArthur Genius Award, Carson’s Greek translations have as much in common with the British playwright Sarah Kane as they do with the Oxbridge cadences of Gilbert Murray or the elegant formalism of Richmond Lattimore, previous renowned translators in the field. In *H of H Playbook*, the text appears to have been cut from a page and pasted into the book. There are no page numbers. The meter is erratic, and her stresses are pugnacious. The vivid beauty of her imagery is cut with staccato outbursts and a mixing in of colloquially modern words. Putatively based on Carson’s own prep book, text wanders about on the page, pages are cut in half or a third and sometimes feature nothing at all. Her personal illustrations accompany the text, but don’t look for explanation there. They’re as opaque as the motives of the gods.

Poets court the banal when they explain, and Carson seldom gives in. When she does it’s Brechtian, with no pretense at psychological realism; the characters address the audience directly and without undue emotion. This can cause tension in plays such as *Elektra*, where exposition drenched in bathos is shoehorned into the words of Clytemnestra and Elektra by Euripides. We’ll never know why, for sure: his audiences were generally familiar with the story of the house of Atreus. Modern audiences can’t be assumed to have even a Wikipedia’s worth of knowledge of Greek myths, so Carson’s dramatic brevity provides the basics of what we need for context. In Brechtian terms, her intent is *gestic*. She wrenches us away from the popular reading of Euripides as a “modern” playwright (read: psychologically realistic) and forces us to acknowledge the forces which act upon humans rather than allowing us to merge with them. The grandchild of Epic Theatre meets the wayward offspring of Epic poetry, perhaps.

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Carson's ability to play with, to *mess with*, classical Greek text, while retaining its authenticity of narrative and theme, is central to understanding her peculiar genius. "H of H" is a playfully obscure reference to the play's protagonist that persists even through the cast list and the first appearance of "H"'s wife, Megara, and his father (well, one of them, anyway), Amphitryon. Play, then, is at the heart of this alternative text (Carson has produced an earlier, more straightforward translation, entitled *Heracles*). Heracles is the first H of the title; the second is Hades, or Hellas, or anything the reader feels fits. Once we've unpacked the clues, we know, without a word being written, that we're in the post-Labours world of the ancient Greece's most famous Hero.

The first scene is located outside a house once owned by H. Near it is parked an Airstream trailer, one of those hideous behemoths so beloved of wealthy, ecologically unconscious Americans. Amphitryon appears from the trailer. His opening words are a perfect compendium of Carson's penchant for mixing the beautiful and the sublime, classical and anti-classical:

Amphitryon:

By a thread hangs our fate
H of H is late.
We are suppliants at an altar
being hounded by the totalitarian cracker
who's seized power in Thebes.

It's unusual for Carson to employ rhyming in her translations, so there's a thematic intent here. That life is not so easily boxed into couplets and symmetrical endings becomes clear a few—well, not stanzas, Carson isn't going to make it that easy—lines on, when Amphitryon comments:

Amphitryon:

Dumb rhyme
for a complexity more sublime
than the self can ordinarily bear.

The rhyming here is remarkably basic, in both cadence and pattern, and yet resonant. It ends up feeling like the lovechild of a restaurant cloakroom coupling between Dr. Seuss and Jez Butterworth, the master of magisterial crudity, blending profane and prosaic in such plays as *Jerusalem*. The reader is unbalanced by the juxtaposing. In so doing they take their first tottering steps into the unrest of the play's world. Butterworth is referenced here for a reason. In *Jerusalem* the inimitably scatological Rooster Byron fights the bailiffs who seek to roust him from his illegal encampment in the woods of Wiltshire. In *H of H Playbook* the tyrant Lykos is engaged in evicting Amphitryon and his household. Hence the need for the first of the Superheroes to rouse himself from his post-Labours torpor and save the family. His wife supplies the introduction:

Enter Megara from trailer, with kids

Megara:

I'm the H of H wife.
We're a suppliant stack.
Every time a door creaks
The kids think he's back.

Lykos, the villain, makes his appearance with Kabuki-like bravura:

Enter Lykos, with goons from offstage L

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Lykos:

...

Is it time to acknowledge
that I won the game?
or how long are you planning to cleave
to this folklorish existential claim?

True, in the standard sitcom this is where
The awful hero strides in bare-
chested and saves the day.
Well, you can chew that crust and throw it away.

As Amphytrion negotiates time to allow his family to dress in their formal best for the execution, we hear the voice of H of H, raving after his final labour:

H of H:

...

So I get done with the Labours, I come home, I look in the mirror and the mirror is *uninhabited*.
No one there.

H speaks in Mametian prose, a sign of the asymmetry of his thought. Seguing through Percy Shelley's act of shooting off his thumb, he describes each labour with increasing weariness until he suddenly skips from third to ninth and then to the famous twelfth, an "extraction" that goes wrong:

H of H:

...

And from that point the day unravelled.

Through H we hear of a tactical operation gone horribly awry. He shoots an elephant while being subtly mocked by Geryon, the "red-winged" man he has been sent to exterminate in order to save a group of young women. Geryon's words leave a mark in H's mind, one the audience recognises as an existential, era-spanning question: what is H's true purpose?

H of H:

...

Cleanse the world, he'd said,
something like that. Bad guys,
monstrosity, exploitation, evil –
make the world a better place.
Civilize it. Civilize who?

H ponders his immersion in bloodlust:

H of H:

...

Wrath plunders you
within. Wrath hooks you up to an ECT
you can't turn off. In the moment of the
volts you feel immaculate and twenty
seconds later you need to feel
immaculate again. You are utterly
proud, you are fantastic.

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In true Brechtian fashion H ponders the use of his beauty and strength by others, and his reliance upon the stereotypes within which his existence finds meaning.

H of H:

...

On down the road I took
my useless beauty, my useless valour.
These little shoes. The day
raved at me.
... and Victor Serge¹
sums it up: occupational psychosis.

H's morose self-realisation, rendered in flowing, vivid prose, is marked by an acute sense of how his beauty and strength have been manipulated:

H of H:

... Depending on
how you count them, the list of my
Labours looks philanthropic for about
the first half then begins drifting
toward trophyism. Stealing "the girdle
of the Amazons" didn't make the world
a better place, it just demoralized the
Amazons and gratified a wealthy
collector.

His reflection is cut short by the reappearance of the Seussian syntax of Megara and their children. The contrast is jarring:

Megara:

Forgive me, dear children, please,
we've become a joke to our enemies.

...

O H of H!
Come to us now, even as a dream, even as a ghost.

Lo and behold, H of H appears, the previously disembodied voice now in the flesh. Hearing Megara's tale of woe, he senses a brand transformation:

H of H:

... I'm here.
His end is clear.
I'll pull out every weapon I know
... fill the plain with blood and complete
the work I should have been doing, instead
of harassing lions.
It was my own glory I fed!
Time now to save the family store.
Farewell my Labours!
H of H the hero is no more.

¹ Victor Serge was the Russian, Bolshevik-era author of *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*.

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In Carson's take on the story, the Chorus is impotent and peripheral.² They are accorded just two lines of commentary at this crucial juncture:

Ch:

Surely, to act right by his family
is one of the things a hero is for.

Throughout, the Chorus assumes the personality of a slightly dotty autodidact at the edge of an event, referencing Jane Austen in backing the performative heroism of H:

Ch:

... if you feel ambivalent
... to the sound of Lykos dying,

That is, if you question the taste
of celebration interlaced
with a death prize,
we personally advise you go read a novel by Jane Austen –
avoiding *Mansfield Park* whose inane
final paragraph tucks the death of Dr. Grant inbetween
a newlywed hero and heroine.

Lykos, upset that the family hasn't lined up, sheep-like, for their ritual execution, blunders into the house and H of H shoots him. But the trouble does not end there. Iris and Madness, a Janus-like figure, appears on the rooftop, introducing themselves as agents of Hera, who's had it in for the famous hero since Zeus' affair with Alcmena produced him.³ Transitioning into voice-over, the goddess drives Heracles to a frenzied madness. This version takes a unique perspective. An electrical storm generates a current that surges into the telephone Heracles holds in his hand—he's ordering a pizza for the kids—and causes "coal flowers", brain crystals, to run out his ear. Convinced Eurystheus is in the house, threatening his family, he kills his children and wife and when he threatens Amphitryon, Athena finally steps in and causes him to fall asleep. In the original, Heracles is tied to a pillar, made aware of his crimes and expresses his wish to commit suicide. Theseus, King of Athens, arrives, and disputes the moral issue at play, at last persuading Heracles to come with him to Athens, in agreement that he can never return to Thebes, even for the funeral of his family. In Carson's telling, Heracles appears at the door of the blood-soaked trailer, ropes trailing off him. The Chorus and Amphitryon eye him warily, but at last approach. Amphitryon likens Heracles' actions to a nuclear meltdown:

Amphitryon:

... My son awoke the
day after Chernobyl, looked around and
asked who committed the atrocity.
And I had to tell him, you did.

Carson underlines the absurdity and self-absorption of post-event guilt using repetition:

² In the original by Euripides, they are old men of Thebes, so the lack of impact is apt.

³ "Heracles" is his reconstituted name, meaning "Hera's glory", an attempt at placating the vengeful goddess that manifestly fails.

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H of H:

Alas.

A:

Alas.

H of H:

Alas.

A:

Alas.

H of H:

Alas.

Let me die.

Theseus, King of Greece, enters. Yet he speaks in voiceover, a distancing technique that eliminates the audience's ability to fall into illusionistic stasis. Not to mention that he channels *Moby Dick*:

Theseus [voiceover]:

The thing you have to understand is,
Not half these people realize they're in
a myth...
I'm just saying, let's be
careful. This whale isn't dead. But he'd
like to be, is why I'm here. He saved me
once. I owe him.

Theseus' only-partly facetious alternative to Heracles' self-elimination is to suggest that he shoot himself while wearing a T-shirt with a lionskin background and I HATE FEAR on the back, and then sell the shirt, bullethole and all, through Sotheby's auction house. The sliding spectrum of references manifests itself in metatext:

Th:

I don't judge you. I'm not saying move back towards life,
I'm saying the future isn't *elsewhere*. We're in a locked
spaceship, H of H, we have nothing but continuing. What
could be more useless than you limping offstage to die in
a dead language?

He counsels H to forget his uncritical reverence for the gods, equating them with perfection in all things moral:

Th:

... I'm just saying, you call them gods, they
call you walking ash.

In a bit of reverse Aristotelianism, Theseus sets about reducing the magnitude of Heracles' situation. Meanwhile H paints himself as self-indulgent whinger:

Th:

So, the future. What's next for H of H?

H of H:

Jump from a cliff. Stab myself in the liver. Burn this flesh away
with fire and cleanse its infamy.

Th:

I had in mind Athens.

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This is where Carson resembles Kane the most. H agrees to go to Athens, on one condition:

H of H:

Let me kiss my old Dad one last time?

This text occupies an entire page. Facing it is a page devoted to a pencil drawing of a man with stitched head, seated and bowed, in the manner of Heracles. The next page is blank. The page facing it contains a single line:

Th:

No.

Another entirely blank page follows. Facing it, a page with another single, lonely line:

H of H:

But I must.

More emptiness, an empty page, the absence of text creating a canyon of unvoiced longing, unexpressed emotion. Then, in the middle of the facing page, stark:

Th:

No.

They begin to move, slowly, turning in the direction of Athens:

Th:

Take my arm.

H of H:

You're my tugboat now.

Th:

So we go.

H of H:

Go.

Th:

Forward only.

H of H:

Forward only.

The Chorus tries to mop up the story, but no one is listening. Theseus and Heracles, supported on his arm, recede in the distance. As they grow smaller in the mind's eye of the reader, the text is followed by a blank half page, then a blank two-thirds page, the edges slightly rough. Nothingness is a protagonist of equal stature to H of H in Carson's conception, and she makes it a physical, positive presence, where so often it is only suggested through negativity. A gifted poet always respects the value of space. In the beginning is nothing; in the end, the same. Temporal reality is simply a construct, a leaky roof to keep out the rain. Carson's eclecticism is not self-conscious or writerly. It's a way of underlining the theme of the play; we're all on a voyage to nowhere, and our task is to row as long, and as far, as we can.

Michael Devine

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