

Necromancing the Phoenix
By Emma Pauly
(she/her/hers or they/them/theirs)
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In writing this essay (or even considering the writing of it), I have been confronted, over and over, with the blessing and curse of specialization. As a dramaturg, I specialize in Greek tragedy (and the adaptation and reworking thereof), a niche within the niche that dramaturgy already is. I have thought I had nothing to say, or that I could not speak to what we will be on the other side of this. I owe Heather Helinksy and Ken Cerniglia in particular a great debt of gratitude for encouraging me otherwise.

I've jokingly referred to my narrow, dusty corner of the dramaturgical world as 'theatrical necromancy' more than once. The image that conjures is one of black cloaks and dripping candles, a raven perched atop a bleached-white skull, maybe a little thunder and lightning for atmosphere, but bear with me. I promise I'm going somewhere with this that isn't Hammer Horror.

The word 'necromancy' in its original context did not refer to the raising of the dead; no zombie armies for your Classical Athenian necromancers, no. Rather, 'necromancy' refers to a divinatory art, a form of future-telling through the summoning and interrogation of spirits. The most famous example of classical necromancy comes from Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, an episode known as the *nekylia*. Acting on the guidance of the magician Circe, Odysseus travels to the edge of the ocean to make a sacrifice and speak to the ghost of the prophet Teiresias, who (he hopes) will guide him to Ithaca, to home and wife and child. He makes his sacrifice, says his prayers, and is greeted by a flood of ghosts, Teiresias only one among them. He sees his war companions, Achilles and Agamemnon, he sees a shipmate recently perished, a 'Greatest Hits' of the classical roster, and his mother.

For me, 'theatrical necromancy' is just that: asking the dead how to get home, asking the dead for their stories in the hope that it might inform our decision-making, our processing, our lives. But that act has a twofold weight now. If we turn to the dead of long ago, we now turn to them with new questions, questions about the dead of the present, the dead of the moment, the new dead.

"Tell me how you suffered. I am suffering and would learn to bear it."

"Tell me how you raged. I am raging and would learn to use it."

"Tell me what you lost. I have lost and would learn to mourn it."

Greek tragedy seems particularly well-suited to these questions, consumed with the life cycle of suffering as it is, obsessed with interrogating and wrestling with all the ways pain can sit in a human (and sometimes a divine) heart and body.

This path is not everyone's path, but it is my path. The dead I speak to are not everyone's dead (and certainly not the only culture or body of work worth communing with), but they are mine. And I will speak to them, and hope that they tell me a story that can help

me find my way home. I can speak to Prometheus, chained to the rock in *Prometheus Bound*, and know the horror of being stuck in one place. I can speak to Andromache, to Hecuba, to Cassandra on the shores of a ruined and overrun Troy in *The Trojan Women*, and know what it feels like when loss falls upon loss, grief upon grief. For myself, I will speak to Dionysus as he appears in *Bacchae*, young and alive, full of rage and rapture, and remember the spirit in which these plays were written and the nature of the deity in whose honor they were performed; Dionysus is a god of creation-in-destruction, of the endless life-death-rebirth cycle, and I will try my hardest not to forget that.

But unlike Odysseus, I cannot stand at the edge of the world and call up my spirits with fresh blood.

Instead, I DM'd a Classics professor on Twitter and asked if he needed help with a project he'd been tweeting about. Miraculously, he did. Again, bear with me.

Today, I sat in my Chicago apartment and participated in the Zoom chat for that project: the Center for Hellenic Studies' reading of *Women of Trachis*, the first (and not the last) of their readings that I have provided dramaturgical support for. In the coming weeks, the Center (in partnership with Out of Chaos Theatre and the Kosmos Society) will be working their way through the entirety of the tragic canon, scholars and actors lifting each other up to tell the same story, scene selections interwoven with commentary, context, and live reactions from YouTube commenters and other curious eyes.

For an hour and a half, with the rain outside an apartment I haven't properly left in weeks, I saw a sliver, a hint of Ithaca, of home.

Emma Pauly is a Chicago-based dramaturg, classicist, translator and performer specializing in Greek tragedy (particularly queer themes within those texts). They are currently serving as dramaturg for the Reading Greek Tragedy Online series under the auspices of the Center for Hellenic Studies, the Kosmos Society, and Out of Chaos Theatre.