

RESEARCH STATEMENT

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My research explores the interrelated functions of theatrical storytelling as both mirror and manufacturer of cultural value systems. All storytelling is intimately related to the culture from which it emerges, but theater is in the unique position of being relentlessly, unremittingly collective. As an ephemeral, collaborative enterprise, any theatrical performance must appeal to a wide enough range of people within a single historical moment to attract sufficient performers and audience members. Unlike a novel, it cannot be undertaken by a single author acting alone, and therefore be written off as simply the ramblings of a single individual. Unlike a movie, which may fail at the box office initially but later gain a cult following, any theatrical piece must be judged appealing enough in the moment to draw an audience sufficient to justify the expense of production. Theatrical storytelling, from this collective position, has a great deal to tell us about the ideas, themes, and narrative structures that appeal to a given culture at a specific moment in time—and the clarity of this picture is increased by looking at not just a single piece, but at reused stories, motifs, or themes within a particular society. My research, working at the intersection of theater and adaptation studies, uses recycled plot elements to explore the cultural constructions that were of interest—or which served as sources of anxiety—for the theater of early modern Western Europe.

My graduate work explored this aspect of theatrical storytelling through two discreet research projects. The first, undertaken for my master's thesis, focused on the recurring motif of brother-sister incest in seventeenth-century English drama. This thesis, interweaving an exploration of seventeenth-century cultural attitudes toward heterosexual sibling incest as revealed in sermons, laws, and treatises with close readings of three highly successful popular plays treating the theme, concluded that the English fascination with brother-sister incest during this time stemmed from an internal cultural conflict between beliefs about purity of blood that favored endogamy and the Biblical prohibition against sibling incest. The second project, my doctoral dissertation, traced the alterations made to the ancient Greek figure of Iphigenia as her stories were retold in the cultural contexts of early modern France and England. This work, examining the recurrence of a particular figure rather than a theme, paired an exploration of French neoclassicism with close readings of nine neoclassical adaptations of the stories surrounding Iphigenia, the most popular Greek figure of the day. Taking as my starting point the curious phenomenon that neoclassical adaptation during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries completely overshadowed direct performance of classical drama on Western Europe's public stages, I argued that adaptation during the neoclassical period was employed as a tool for erasing any evidence of cultural difference between Europe's revered cultural ancestors (the ancient Greeks) and their Christianized early modern descendants. Looking specifically at changes in gendered codes between the ancient and modern contexts, this work revealed how adaptation was used to cover up any constructions of gender that did not fit with early modern ideas of the characteristics considered 'natural' or God-given—and therefore invariant—to the two sexes. I concluded that the act of adaptation in the neoclassical movement served as a kind of sleight-of-hand employed to make the socio-religious understandings of the present culture appear timeless

and universal, as though they had been as true in the ancient world or the neighboring country as in the here-and-now.

The main contribution of this research is to the emerging interdisciplinary field of adaptation studies, which has thus far largely focused on adaptation across storytelling mediums—primarily the study of novels adapted into films. This kind of medium-to-medium study has led the field as a whole to view adaptation largely as a palimpsestic or doubled experience, in which the audience knows both the source artwork and its adaptation and finds pleasure in comparing several versions of the same story. My research, focusing on adaptation not across medium but across time in a context where knowledge of the source text is limited and knowledge of the adaptation widespread, uncovers a different set of implications for the study of adaptation. My work shows how adaptation may be employed not to *reveal* variation, but to *conceal* it. In the process, it demonstrates the importance of the study of adaptation to understanding the mechanisms by which European universalism—a concept that has had drastic ramifications for societies worldwide in the wake of European colonialism—was constructed and employed.

Parts of this research have served as the basis for three published articles: “Opera’s ‘Return to Antiquity’: Adaptation, Gender, and the Illusion of Authenticity in Gluck’s *Iphigénie en Aulide*,” published in the *Journal of Adaptation Film and Performance* in 2016; “Racine’s Ancients: Paradoxes of Adaptation in the Panegyric Tradition of French Neoclassicism,” published by *Ecumenica: A Journal of Theatre and Performance* in 2018; and “Human Sacrifice, Nuns, and Gender-Bent Kings: The Effect of Religious Change on Gender Presentation in Early Modern Adaptations of *Iphigenia among the Taurians*,” published by *Ecumenica: Performance and Religion* in 2020. I have built on this work to examine parallel situations in the present, supplying chapters on a contemporary Iphigenia adaptation to *Vying for the Iron Throne: Essays on Power, Gender, Death and Performance in HBO’s Game of Thrones* from McFarland Press, and on the continued use of neoclassical rhetoric in canon formation for *Troubling Traditions: Canonicity, Theatre, and Performance in the US*, forthcoming from Routledge. In addition to these works, I am presently expanding my dissertation for publication as a monograph on the role of neoclassical adaptation in creating the dichotomy of ‘the West’ and ‘the rest’ during Europe’s colonial projects. I have been in talks with the acquisitions editor of Northwestern University Press about the possible inclusion of this monograph in their series, “Rethinking the Early Modern,” and plan to submit a formal book proposal in the summer of 2022. Upon completion of the book project, I will revisit the work I did for my master’s thesis, expanding it out to a book-length study with an eye toward publication as my second monograph. My next research project, will expand my study of neoclassical adaptation to the uses of Greek tragic plots in colonial and postcolonial contexts, interrogating how European colonizers’ use of Greek tragedy as central to their own canon was turned back on them by resisting colonial subjects.

Though my research is largely focused on a specific historical context, it draws conclusions about the interactions between stories and their surrounding cultures that help scholars focusing on representation of any kind understand the ways in which their subject of study both reflects and shapes human thought. It is my hope that this research will help us to dismantle the very cultural fictions that adaptation and repetition have helped to naturalize, revealing the substantial work that must go into making any given construction seem ‘natural.’