

'Perpetually Relevant, Perpetually New': Mary Zimmerman's Theatrical Responses to Classical Literature

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Mary Zimmerman, the highly-acclaimed theatre director, is the recipient not only of numerous Chicago-based Joseph Jefferson Awards honouring local theatre talent, but also of a Tony Award for her 2002 direction of *Metamorphoses*, as well as a 1998 MacArthur 'Genius' Award, intended to support and recognise a select few individuals considered to show exceptional creative potential. A member of the Lookingglass Theatre and an Artistic Associate of the Goodman Theatre, both in Chicago, she is also a Professor of Performance Studies at Northwestern University. It is at Northwestern that many of her productions are first staged, and it is there too that her own theatrical training began in earnest.

Zimmerman began her undergraduate studies at Northwestern majoring in Composition and Literature, but within a matter of weeks she had transferred to the Theatre Department for her Bachelor's degree, and later to the Performance Studies Department where she remained for her MA, PhD, and beyond into her academic career. Northwestern, along with New York University (NYU), has been considered the birthplace of the emerging discipline of Performance Studies, and Zimmerman was studying in the department when it was in its infancy.¹

To date, Mary Zimmerman has adapted and directed four productions from the classical canon: *The Odyssey*, *Metamorphoses*, *The Trojan Women*, and *Argonautika*, as well as a number of works derived from the mythic and oral traditions of other cultures, such as Persia (*The Arabian Nights*, 1992, and *Mirror of the Invisible World*, 1997). The world of myth clearly fascinates her, and she has spoken of the 'latent theatricality' of myths passed down via the oral tradition, and of their quality of being 'perpetually relevant, perpetually new'.² Considering herself and the actors with whom she is working to be the latest in a long line of oral poets, whose prerogative it is to retell and remake a story anew, Zimmerman is free to modernise as she sees fit. Yet it is striking that this is not one of her primary aims. Rather than recasting her classical productions explicitly and fully in the modern world – as was seen recently in J. Nicole Brooks' *Fedra: Queen of Haiti* at the Lookingglass Theatre in Chicago (directed by Laura Eason, 2009), where many of Zimmerman's productions have been staged, and where she herself is an Ensemble Member – Zimmerman often prefers to remain close to the ancient setting, while still adding in what she terms 'anachronistic touches'.³ It is these 'anachronisms' that Zimmerman regards as part of the

process of making her mark as a new bard reworking the story.

Her description of her relationship to the ancient works is particularly interesting. Rather than an ambivalent, problematic relationship to the ancient world, which has commonly been seen in recent years in the works of postcolonial writers (such as Derek Walcott's *Odyssey: A Stage Version*, 1992-93), or feminist writers (Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad*, 2005, for example), Zimmerman speaks of an easy closeness to them:

So I don't set out to change them or quarrel with these texts, I'm more interested in a sort of loving dialogue with them.⁴

The manner in which this 'loving dialogue' takes shape on stage, and the extent to which it is perceived as such by the audience responding to her work, will be considered in the later sections of this essay, which will address her four Graeco-Roman productions in turn.

Zimmerman's introduction to mythology was via Edith Hamilton's *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and Heroes* (1942). Indeed, she has claimed that it is on this book that she has based her entire career!⁵ In fact, Edith Hamilton's sister Alice, a Professor of Pathology at Northwestern University, lived at Chicago's Hull-House for twenty-two years, organising medical education classes and baby clinics. At the same time, she would have been aware of Hull-House's theatre group which, under the direction of Laura Dainty Pelham, is credited with giving rise to the Little Theatre Movement. It was the latter, under the auspices of Maurice Browne in Chicago, which staged *The Trojan Women* in 1912 and *Medea* in 1920. It is conceivable then, and perhaps even likely, that Edith Hamilton'such an important figure in American classical studies?at least watched some of the performances of ancient Greek and Roman plays staged at Hull-House and the Chicago Little Theater. She could thereby be seen to be connected with the Chicago theatrical scene both of the early twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first century via Mary Zimmerman's work.

The Odyssey

Mary Zimmerman began her theatrical dialogue with ancient Greece and Rome by turning to one of the founding texts not just of the Greek world, but of the Western canon, and arguably of world literature as a whole.⁶ Homer's *Odyssey* has engaged, enthralled, and inspired audiences since the 8th century BCE, and at the dawn of the third millennium its themes are no less resonant. Zimmerman identified with the *Odyssey*'s archetypal quest for home even as a young girl, when she was living in England far from her home in Nebraska, and considers that element of the epic to be, as many others also have, particularly those involved with performance,⁷ 'the most ancient story there is'.⁸

Zimmerman's *Odyssey* was first staged at Northwestern in 1989. Part of her studies for her doctorate, the initial Northwestern staging and subsequent Lookingglass production in 1990 were both performed over two evenings ? this in itself interestingly reflects the thesis of classical scholars such as Oliver Taplin, who argues that the *Odyssey* was most likely to have been performed, as oral poetry, over two days originally.⁹ Nine years later, a one-evening production was premiered at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago (on 18 September 1999), and it is the text used in this production that was later published by Northwestern University Press.¹⁰ Zimmerman, not able to read the ancient Greek text herself, accessed the *Odyssey* via Robert Fitzgerald's translation because, as she explains,

It's the one I grew up with and the one I love. For me, who doesn't speak a word of Greek, Fitzgerald's *Odyssey* simply is *The Odyssey*, and, right or wrong, I feel a devotion to it similar to

that which some people feel to the King James Bible.¹¹

Zimmerman's adaptation stays close to the structure of the Homeric original, though cutting episodes (such as that of the Laestrygonians or Penelope's dream of the geese) where she feels necessary in the interests of keeping the play's length manageable for a modern theatre audience. She even acknowledges that the genre-shift from epic to drama remains incomplete in her adaptation, and deliberately so as she prefers to 'preserve much of the narrative voice by giving it to Athena'.¹² Indeed, the prominence of Athena, already foremost among the gods in the *Odyssey* and whose ubiquity throughout the epic is second only to that of Odysseus, is one of the striking features of Zimmerman's *Odyssey*. This is connected to one of the most conspicuous innovations Zimmerman makes to the text of her *Odyssey*: while the play stays very close to Fitzgerald's translation, Zimmerman suddenly diverges from it to expand at relative length on the Sirens episode. In Homer, this episode, often misrepresented particularly by Hollywood-type portrayals, is brief, and what the Sirens promise is knowledge, rather than sexual pleasure (*Od.* 12.166-200). Jane Harrison, who contributed so much to modern studies of Greek mythology and was one of the Cambridge Ritualists,¹³ also moving among the Bloomsbury Group and being particularly highly regarded by Virginia Woolf, commented on this fact:

It is strange and beautiful that Homer should make the Sirens appeal to the spirit, not to the flesh. To primitive man, Greek or Semite, the desire to know ? to be as the gods ? was the fatal desire.¹⁴

However, in modern, visual media, it has been less the intellectual impulses, and more the sexual ones, that the Sirens have promised to satisfy. Zimmerman's response to this, whether to the *mores* of the modern world itself or to the contemporary depictions of Homer which render the Sirens almost entirely sexual, is to create Sirens who embody the stuff of stereotypical male fantasy. Thus, all dressed in red ? perhaps in a nod to Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) in which the women whose primary role is to bear children for the Wives, are dressed in red habits, or to the notion of the 'scarlet woman' ? Zimmerman's Sirens are a nurse, a girl scout, a businesswoman, a teacher, a bride, and a nun.¹⁵ What is more, the words they speak, far from promising knowledge, are the empty praises and blandishments that men are stereotypically considered to wish to hear in a male fantasy world. Thus they tell Odysseus and his men that they are so important that their very beings eclipse the women's ('my self, my self, is nothing?); that the women become nothing but a mirror to the men; that, 'You're perfect the way you are. Don't change?; that the Sirens' arms have no purpose but to cradle children. They list the synonyms of woman to be found in a dictionary, objectifying them, emphasizing especially those that focus on a woman as object of sexual desire:

venus, nymph, wench, grisette, little bit of fluff, girl, etc., inamorata, love, etc., spinster, virgin, bachelor girl, new woman, amazon.¹⁶

Finally the Sirens leave the stage, repeating to the men reassuringly, 'No, don't get up; I'll take care of it?.

Undoubtedly Zimmerman's retelling of the Sirens episode injects humour into the play at this stage, and draws the audience in with the recognition of very familiar gender stereotypes. It does more than this, though, as is hinted at by the fact that this is the sole moment in the play when Zimmerman expands on the *text* of the *Odyssey*. The production itself was interwoven with dance and movement interludes -- notably the episode of the Lotus Eaters which is enacted entirely by mime -- as is characteristic of Zimmerman's work and the very physical theatre of the Lookingglass, but it is only within the Sirens episode that Zimmerman elaborates on Homer's original and Fitzgerald's translation of it.

Mihoko Suzuki has written of Mary Zimmerman's intention to 'adapt the epic for the stage through the perspective of a woman reader'.¹⁷ This is certainly one of Zimmerman's aims, signalled by the striking

opening scene in which a modern young woman struggles to take an interest in her reading of the opening lines of the *Odyssey*, until the Muse is physically invoked and spurred into action by this bored reading, grabbing hold of the girl and breathing the inspiration into her. The following scene, set (as in Homer) among the gods, sees the woman reader dressed as, and transformed into, Athena. As Suzuki remarks, this sequence

Forg[es] a link between the poet as creator of the text, Athena as the presiding deity who weaves the narrative of Odysseus's return, and twenty-first century women readers of the epic.¹⁸

Nevertheless, despite Zimmerman's clear interest in the feminine roles of the epic, she shies away from confronting the problematic figure of Helen, whose role is minimised in the scene on Sparta, which is (likewise tellingly) labelled as the 'Menelaus' scene in the published text.¹⁹ Suzuki considers this to be Zimmerman's 'rehabilitation of Helen' but notes that it 'paradoxically renders her less prominent than Menelaus'. Certainly this is the case, and leads one to consider whether Zimmerman's adaptation of the *Odyssey* would be better considered as a feminine, rather than a feminist, one: for all the ambivalence one may feel towards the Homeric Helen, she has a power and an equality with those around her that is not glimpsed in the other mortal women until the conclusion of the epic when Penelope asserts her *homophrosyne* ('like-mindedness', in ancient Greek) with Odysseus by successfully tricking him as no other character has managed to do.

If Zimmerman's adaptation is considered to be a 'feminine' reading of the *Odyssey*, this would tap into a characteristic of the epic that has long been noted. Back in 1713, Richard Bentley made the observation that 'the *Iliad* he made for the men and the *Odysseys* for the other sex',²⁰ and Samuel Butler famously took the hypothesis further when he formulated *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (1897), suggesting that Homer wrote *herself* into the epic in the character of Nausicaa.²¹ Zimmerman's adaptation plays with the same features in a manner that helps contribute to its success in the contemporary era, rendering what she has elsewhere termed 'anachronisms' – for example, the Sirens dressed in the uniforms of modern women – as integrally connected to the Homeric sentiment, *and* to a contemporary audience interested in witnessing a modern production first and foremost. [Back to top](#)

Metamorphoses

The next work from the classical canon that Mary Zimmerman turned her attention to was Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The earliest version of this was entitled *Six Myths* and was performed at Northwestern University in May 1996. Even at this early stage, the pool that would be the focal point of the later productions – embodying a different function in so many of the varying myths, and so often commented on admiringly by reviewers – was in place. The Lookingglass Theatre Company produced the world premiere of Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* (as the developed *Six Myths* became) two years later at the Ivanhoe Theatre in Chicago in October 1998. Zimmerman's choice of myths is striking; focusing on only twelve of Ovid's collected tales, and indeed incorporating one not from Ovid but from Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (the story of Cupid and Psyche), the violence, especially sexual violence, is excised in her adaptation, as is the fickleness of the gods which likewise comprises such a large part of Ovid's work.²² The effect of this, rendering the work almost entirely anthropocentric, may well accommodate a twenty-first century audience more easily, even in a play that centres around magical metamorphoses requiring a suspension of disbelief. Indeed, in Zimmerman's play there is an almost cloying belief in the (literally) transformative power of love. Few of these characters are transformed to allow them to escape from an imminent danger as is seen in Ovid, beginning with Daphne's metamorphosis into a laurel tree (*Met.* 1.452-566). Rather, the overarching message of the play is underscored in the final moments of the play in which the actors,

now ?metamorphosed? into themselves as people, stand in the pool, facing the audience, and whisper, ?Let me die still loving, and so, never die?.

This theme, this overarching message, combined with the timing of the production?s move to New York (2001), contributed to the play?s great success. Zimmerman herself was awarded a Tony Award for Best Direction of the production, and it brought her nationwide recognition in the United States as the production moved from the off-Broadway Second Stage Theatre to Broadway?s Circle in the Square Theatre four months later. This move came in February 2002, but it is the initial staging in New York in October 2001, less than a month after the attack on the Twin Towers, that really engaged audiences and critics alike and seemed to offer a hope and a catharsis from the real-life tragedy that had just been experienced by New Yorkers. Thus, the reviews spoke of the play in terms that were perhaps more emotional, and more glowing, than they might have been had the production been staged at a time when New York was feeling less vulnerable. Indeed the New York Times critic, Ben Brantley acknowledged this in his review, writing that,

In another context, it [Zimmerman?s *Metamorphoses*] might have registered as too precious, perhaps, too arts-and-crafts for Eastern urbanites. But for now it is speaking with a dreamlike hush directly to New Yorkers? souls.[23](#)

His review is even entitled ?How Ovid Helps Deal with Loss and Suffering? and comments on how the stories of separation (of Eurydice from Orpheus, of Ceyx from Alcyone) ?freely draw tears? from the audience. That such an emotional impact would have been unlikely at any other time may be true, but does not detract from the fact that in Zimmerman?s adaptation of a two-thousand-year-old text a modern audience made an emotional link to the traumas of their own times. Zimmerman has made it clear that she did not change the text in light of 9/11, but she has spoken of the profound impact and difficulty of performing some of these stories so soon after those events:

There are at least two stories in the play where someone goes away, off to work basically, and is suddenly taken from the earth ? just destroyed. And I remember on our first public performance, which was the 18th, just sort of shaking and trembling off stage about showing this and dragging the audience through this story, including the dying prayer of a man saying, I only pray my body is found. Just let my body be found.[24](#)

Brantley attempts to draw a connection between the world of Augustan Rome in which Ovid wrote *Metamorphoses*, and that of America in 2001, as both experiencing ?an era of uncertainty and a shaken empire?.[25](#) The notion is appealing, though would perhaps be more convincingly drawn if one considers, rather than a ?shaken? empire (which would be a difficult state to argue of Augustan Rome), the vast military and economic expansion that the two ?empires? were undergoing at the times of Ovid?s and Zimmerman?s *Metamorphoses*. The idea of America as another Roman empire, in the twenty-first century particularly, has been a popular one, argued over in the political media and on internet blogs, and denied by some as vehemently as it is asserted by others. Zimmerman?s own reasons for undertaking the *Metamorphoses* were not political; her adaptation?s complete focus on the personal offers an antidote to the political, in a sense reflecting Ovid?s own poem?s controversial use of the epic form, dactylic hexameter, only to satirise the very features that comprise an epic. [Back to top](#)

Trojan Women

In contrast to the emphasis on the personal in *Metamorphoses*, it is the political that resonated through and empowered Mary Zimmerman?s production of Seneca?s play *Trojan Women* in 2003. She chose to

work from the translation by David Slavitt, whose translation she had also used for her *Metamorphoses*; she has explained that it is because of Slavitt's work that she was first drawn to Seneca's play, believing him to be "a brilliantly strong translator".²⁶ This meant foregoing Edith Hamilton's translation, despite her great admiration for Hamilton's other work. It also meant, of course, not choosing to produce the more popular and often-staged version by Euripides. Although Seneca's play itself responded to Euripides' text, in an act of ancient reception, Seneca makes two particular adjustments, both of which could be seen to be more in keeping with the time of Zimmerman's production and the message she wished to convey. Firstly, the gods are absent from Seneca's drama – for a twenty-first century audience watching a tragedy, this allows them to dispense with one suspension of disbelief and, arguably, to engage with the spectacle before them more fully and within the context of their own experiences. This enabled Zimmerman's anti-war message to speak directly of the Iraq war which was coming to an official close in April 2003 when the play was staged at the Goodman, but which, as time has demonstrated, has had a very bloody and devastating aftermath. In addition of course, as Seneca's plays have always done, the dispensation with divine figures who take a just interest in the affairs of humans, leads to the conclusion that responsibility for these catastrophic events must lie in solely human hands. Secondly, Seneca's tragedy is frequently more graphic in its depictions of the horrors of war and violence.

Zimmerman has spoken of the resonance of Hecuba's opening words in *Trojan Women* with the events of 9/11:

The language she uses is so resonant and familiar in terms of descriptions and fact of September 11th, in which she says, you know, "We thought that god had built our city, we thought that we were safe, but our high towers are fallen and crumpled down into dust. The air is filled with billows of black smoke and ash that hangs in our throat and makes us gag because we know it's human flesh." On and on like that, and you have this really strong identification with her, but then when the Greeks come on, they're captors and conquerors, *their* language has an uncanny resemblance to the language of our own administration as well. And it's a very complex series of arguments, in which the Greeks feel that they must pre-emptively kill the last little grandson of Priam or he will grow up and wreak havoc on the Greeks in years to come.²⁷

Her observations resonate with the responses of other theatrical artists; in America in the twentieth century, it is interesting to examine the performance history of *Trojan Women*. More commonly, it is Euripides' version of the play that is performed; Seneca's plays are notoriously hard to stage, a fact which Zimmerman claims to have been unaware of until she had determined on producing it and then read of their perceived problematic nature in Slavitt's foreword to his translation. It is also a quality which she denies of Seneca's *Trojan Women*, asserting that even if they were originally intended to be read rather than staged, she finds them to be "dramatically structured".²⁸

Mary Zimmerman's production of *Trojan Women*, set in the present, compelled the audience, in the words of one reviewer, to "watch on stage what we've been watching on CNN for the past month".²⁹ The geographical proximity of ancient Troy and modern-day Iraq did not go unnoticed; indeed, in a nation with a modern history of invading Asia (Iraq, Vietnam, Afghanistan, for example), Troy itself and particularly the tragedies of the devastating aftermath of the Trojan War, can become especially problematic and, correspondingly, especially poignant. For a nation more at home identifying with the Greek warriors such as Odysseus/Ulysses, seeing such a "hero" insist on the killing of the innocent Astyanax is rendered all the more uncomfortable, as well as painful. Indeed, Agamemnon, played at the Goodman Theatre by Frederic Stone, was described as "leaven[ing] his arrogance with stiffness and anger, suggesting Rumsfeld and Cheney without pushing the parallel over the top".³⁰ Another reviewer saw Ulysses as having "the bland demeanor of Vice President Dick Cheney".³¹ The contemporary resonances were

foregrounded, in addition by the blood-thirsty Pyrrhus? U.S. army uniform, just as Zimmerman had intended they should be.

Naturally, there were exceptions to those who felt the contemporary resonances to be effective. Jack Helbig, writing for the *Daily Herald*, claims that

even though *Trojan Women* -- about the aftermath of a war -- happens to open at a time when the media is dominated by news about the aftermath of our own recent war, this play contains few direct references to contemporary affairs. Zimmerman has inserted a line or two, to make the Greeks sound like Pentagon officials, but most of the time the play is set firmly in the remote past.³²

Helbig's complaint seems determined to deny resonances that he himself perceived ? an impression further corroborated when he claims that ?Those who opposed the war will see anti-war messages everywhere?.

Nevertheless, Zimmerman's choice of play at this time was very deliberate: originally she had planned to stage another adaptation of hers, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*. As the political landscape changed and moved rapidly towards what was, at the time of planning, the impending war in Iraq, Zimmerman decided instead to direct an unambivalently anti-war play, observing that Seneca's play ?just kept figure-eighting from ancient times into our modern situation?.³³ [Back to top](#)

Argonautika

In 2006, three years after her production of *The Trojan Women* opened, Mary Zimmerman returned once more to ancient Greek literature. Adapting and directing *Argonautika*, Zimmerman turned to Gaius Valerius Flaccus' version from the first century AD, as well as to Apollonius Rhodius' more renowned, third-century BCE version, and has spoken of this process of combining the two as being ?in keeping with the oral tradition of constant combining and revising of stories?.³⁴ For a third time Zimmerman used David Slavitt's translation, for the material from Gaius Valerius Flaccus, while using Peter Green's translation to access Apollonius Rhodius's text. Zimmerman's repeated turn to Slavitt prompts interesting questions on the nature of translation, and how the choice of translator may be made and may affect the theatrical production. Zimmerman's *Argonautika* could be seen to synthesize her approaches in her two previous adaptations of classical literature: the emphasis on the personal seen in *Metamorphoses*, now intermingles with political messages concerning the nature of power and the destructive nature of man's thirst for it. While the overtly political standpoint of her *Trojan Women* elicited modern-day parallels for much of the audience, as evidenced by the reviews, *Argonautika* was more discreet, though nevertheless engaged in a similar dialogue with contemporary events. Although fewer critics drew attention to the fact, nevertheless the country in which Jason goes to seek, and to steal, the Golden Fleece is once again on the boundary between Europe and Asia (Colchis lying in the west of modern-day Georgia), close enough to recall the ongoing American military ventures in Iraq and Afghanistan. Zimmerman herself has spoken of the ?resonance with the current political situation?, particularly in terms of the lofty ambitions with which the expedition for the Golden Fleece began, and the fiasco into which it descended.³⁵ The emptiness of the prize of the Golden Fleece has always underscored the futility of the task.

As the *Chicago Tribune* theatre critic, Chris Jones, observed, *Argonautika* was another volley into that discussion that Zimmerman has been holding for some time:

For at least 15 years, Zimmerman has been reminding us all that countries such as Iraq or Iran, and cities such as Baghdad, are the central conduits for the unifying myths of western civilization, not the fraught, atrophied ?others? we see on the nightly news. This show is exceptionally strong in

that vital regard.³⁶

Not only does Zimmerman refuse to allow the pernicious 'othering' encouraged in the contemporary era by the rhetoric of the 'war on terror', but perhaps even more importantly, she exposes the frailty and cost of misguided ventures into other people's lands. As Steven Oxman wrote of the major themes of Zimmerman's production:

Civilizations set out on 'adventures', always thinking they're one conquest away from ridding the world of the last tyrant and creating utopia (sound familiar?). But this story reminds us that such efforts have a nasty habit of not turning out as expected.³⁷

The foregrounding of this theme, coupled with the exposure of Jason as the highly-flawed epic hero that Apollonius depicted, fosters Zimmerman's political, anti-war theme.

Nevertheless, the second half of the play is largely devoted to the story of Medea. Perhaps in keeping with her intention to highlight the cross-cultural bridges between peoples, Zimmerman's interest in her is not so much in her 'barbarian' status as a non-Greek, as in her role as a young girl, barely yet a woman. The love story between Medea and Jason, which is often considered to have produced some of Apollonius's finest writing, is the focus. Afflicted by irresistible love for Jason at the behest of the goddesses Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite, the wound caused by Eros's arrow continues to bleed throughout the play, staining Medea's virginal white dress crimson. Zimmerman is famous for such visually powerful images, which elicit emotional responses in the audience, as evidenced in reactions to the inventive use of the pool in *Metamorphoses* or the U.S. army fatigues worn by the cruel Pyrrhus in *Trojan Women*. The *Arlington Heights Daily Herald* reviewer, Barbara Vitello, in considering the faithlessness of Jason, and the weakness of his excuses to Medea, remarks of the story, 'How very contemporary. But this is a modern myth after all.'³⁸ The tone of bitterness detectable in this comment is testament to the power of Zimmerman's work. She is able to engage modern audiences and to cause them to reflect on their own times through the prism of the ancient myths. In this way, Mary Zimmerman creates works that contribute to the two-way dialogue between ancient and modern that is at the core of classical reception studies, and has garnered the popularity and acclaim to bring this to a broad contemporary audience. [Back to top](#)

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