

Mary Koutsoudaki

**A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE BY ARTHUR MILLER:
A HOLISTIC VIEW FOR A TRAGEDY OF ALL TIMES**

"I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings are."¹

Arthur Miller is one of the twentieth century playwrights who is greatly concerned with the universality of Greek tragedy and its application to contemporary reality. His early plays and theatre essays reflect his intense preoccupation with the nature of the tragic action and the role of the tragic hero in classical Greek drama. But in his later plays, especially in *A View from the Bridge*, Miller seems to acquire a more profound understanding of the essence of Greek tragedy.

An analysis of the play itself, the reference to his essay 'On Social Plays', as well as his introductory notes to these plays (*A View from the Bridge* and *A Memory of Two Mondays*), will illustrate Miller's appreciation of classical drama. The story on which *A View from the Bridge* is based, as Miller states in his notes, "must be some re-enactment of a Greek myth which was ringing a long buried bell in my own subconscious mind."² It is the story of Eddie Carbone, the longshoreman, the common man, who rises to tragic stature through the confrontation with his particular situation. His attraction for his niece, whom he had raised like a daughter, is strongly reminiscent of the manner by which Greek tragedy dealt with the theme of incest, which destroyed the universal order, caused the anger of the gods and resulted in a catharsis through a bloody end (Oedipus Rex, Phaedra). The object of Eddie's obsession, Catherine, suffers from the inner conflict of her love for Rodolpho and the Electra type of feeling she cherishes for her uncle. When Rodolpho asks her to marry him, she is afraid of hurting Eddie and at the end she wants to save him. Beatrice, Eddie's wife, is the Penelope-type devoted to her husband despite her awareness of his being often wrong. When even Catherine has forsaken Eddie, Beatrice remains on his side; she agrees not to attend Catherine's wedding because Eddie forbids it, and when he dies she covers him with her body. Rodolpho, «startlingly blond», depicted like Paris who violated Menelaus' hospitality in ancient Sparta, is the omen for the Carbone household. As in the case of the Homeric hero, effeminate

1. Arthur Miller, *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: The Viking Penguin Press, 1978), p. 3.

2. —, *A View from the Bridge* (New York: The Viking Press, 1955), p. 12. Hereafter cited parenthetically in the text by page.

qualities are attributed to him; he can sing and cook and sew, and he is associated with a Trojan dreamland where fountains spring and orange - trees bloom (p. 112). According to the Greek tradition he has violated his protector's hospitality by courting Catherine without Eddie's permission. The obligations of hospitality possibly dictated the most sacred unwritten law, which, under the auspices of Xenios Zeus, was highly revered in ancient Greece.

However, it is not only the mythic allusions which make *A View from the Bridge* a 'Greek play'; the actual staging and the use of several theatrical devices prove Miller's intention to focus on a tragedy which faithfully traces the pattern of Greek drama. The classical nature of the play becomes apparent as soon as the curtain is raised on a simple setting, part of which consists of two columnar shapes with a pediment over suggesting Greek architectural influence. The Greek element is further emphasized with the entrance of Alfieri, a chorus - character, who through the tragic formality of his first soliloquy foreshadows the classical nature of the imminent tragic action. He introduces himself as a "lawyer like a priest" (p. 86) revealing his function in the play as the augurer who in ancient Greece defended the written and unwritten law pronouncing terrible oracles on man's fate. Alfieri's primary comments on the origin of the immigrants are of great significance if we consider the fact that Syracuse used to be a Greek colony where classical civilization flourished:

I think of Sicily, from where these people came,
The Roman rocks of Calabria,
Syracuse on the cliff, where Carthaginian and Greek
Fought such bloody fights (p. 87).

Here, the tragic issue is foreshadowed through the heroic element suggested in the battle theme and Marco's presence serves to tragically end the play through revenge. However, Marco's character has more serious implications than merely serving to tragically seal the action of the play. When accusing Eddie, the agony of his cry: "that one! He Killed my children! That one stole the food from my children!" (p. 150) justifies Miller's labeling the play as 'social' in the manner of Greek tragedy. That is "the relations of man as a social animal, rather than his definition as a separate entity, was the dramatic goal" (p. 1). Consequently, as a social animal man has to live in harmony with a system of written and unwritten laws dictated to him by the surrounding society. And Miller's insistence on the value of the unwritten law is indisputably derived from the Greek drama. When Alfieri tries to explain to Eddie that "The law is nature / The law is only a word for what has right to happen / When the law is wrong it's because it's unnatural" (p. 140), the audience is reminded of the same theme's treatment in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Of greater significance, the debate of Marco and Alfieri on the

value of written or unwritten law is a mere paraphrase of the famous controversy between Kreon and Antigone in the homonymous play: "Marco: 'The law? All the law is not in a book'. Alfieri: Yes, in a book. There is no other law" (p. 157).

Apart from the mythic qualities of the characters, *A View from the Bridge* is reminiscent of Greek tragedy in another respect: its emphasis on the power of the external forces which determine man's fate. Miller's explanation of the fateful interplay is not simple. In an article which appeared in *The New York Times* (September 25, 1955), he wrote:

There was such an iron bound purity in the autonomic egocentricity of the aims of each of the persons involved that the weaving together of their lives seems almost the work of a fate. I have tried to press as far as my reason can go toward defining the objective and subjective elements that made that fate, but I must confess that in the end a mystery remains for me.

The inevitability of fate (moira) is pointed out in Alfieri's speeches throughout the play. The tragic hero is not to blame for his deeds. When addressing Eddie, Alfieri speaks of the god's intervention in man's life: You know sometimes God mixes up the people.

There is too much love for the daughter

There is too much love for the niece (p. 119)

and later on when trying to defend Eddie: "This is not God, Marco, you hear? Only God makes justice" (p. 154). Thus, it is destiny that leads the play to its tragic end.

In his earlier essays, especially in 'Tragedy and the Common Man' and 'The Nature of Tragedy', Miller had strongly opposed the fatalistic attitude of Greek drama and the gravity attributed to the exalted rank of the tragic hero. He had explained that in retaining his thematic emphasis on questions of "right and wrong" he was attempting to locate the moral dilemma in more realistic situations than the sublimeness of ancient drama. He had tried to apply his thesis of modern drama in his early plays, which he interpreted as contradicting ancient tragedy concerning the role of fate and the status of the tragic hero. In this way, his *Man who Had All the Luck* is a clear argument in favor of free will. Luck is manmade and "a man must understand the presence of god in his hands."³ *Death of a Salesman* is also an attack on the Aristotelian view of tragedy as something fit only for kings and heroes. Through the character of Willy Loman Miller professed that he counterbalan-

3. Sheila Hufel, *The Burning Glass* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1965), p. 83.

ced Greek drama with his own view of tragedy and the common man. However, in his 'Social Plays' he has undoubtedly captured the essence of Greek tragedy, which did not only aspire to personal salvation, but, in reality, intended to express social concerns:

To put it simply or oversimply, a drama rises in stature and intensity in proportion to the weight of its application to all manner of men. It gains its weight as it deals more and more with the whole man, not either his subjective or his social life alone, and the Greek was unable to conceive a man or anything else except as a whole (p. 4).

As soon as Miller has attained an awareness of the universal value of classical Greek theatre he is able to write a play like *A View from the Bridge*, in many respects similar to Greek drama, which was not only valid to the ancient world but is a drama for all times.

His tragic hero, Eddie Carbone, is a man for all times who cannot suppress his passions and their consequences, which affect not only the environment directly associated with him but society, in general. Eddie's conduct in life reminds the audience of the human weaknesses of the characters depicted by Sophocles or Euripides and not of the infallibility and loftiness expected from a character of Aeschylean stature. It is very important to be sensitive to the different aspects within Greek drama itself before attempting generalizations. In this respect, Miller's drama is not Aeschylean but more Euripidean or Sophoclean, attributing greater significance to the personal characteristics of the heroes rather than dictating general moral principles. When compared to the neoclassical tragedy, exemplified particularly by Corneille or Racine, Miller is not as the former only concerned with abstract virtues as honor, duty and loyalty but as the latter preoccupied with the conflict caused by particular situations of individual passions.

In *A View from the Bridge* Miller's realization of the universality of Greek drama is revealed throughout Alfieri's speeches. In his first soliloquy Alfieri comments: "Thinking it is all so timeless here" (p. 87). Following this statement the contemplation on bloody fights in ancient settings foreshadows the tragic issue of the play while the reference to Al Capone and Franklin Yale transfer the exalted figures of Hannibal and Caesar to the contemporary reality of the Brooklyn waterfront. "The hunting eagles of the olden time / Fierce above Italian forests" meet with the seagulls of Red Hook, "a slum that faces the bay, / seaward from Brooklyn Bridge" (p. 88). These lines are of great significance for the general understanding of the play. *A View from the Bridge* might be the most classical of Miller's plays but it is not a mere imitation of Greek drama. Its value rather lies in the method

by which Miller demonstrates the universality of the Greek plays as it applies to the daily life of our times. Miller's plays are outstanding on the contemporary stage because of their holistic view concerning the individual and society in general. Miller's drama, in the manner of Greek tragedy, is a drama of involvement and objectivity; it does not deal with the frustrations of a single being who is detached from society, as is the case of the hero in contemporary avant - garde theatre (Sartre, Camus, Ionesco). Eddie Carbone is not alien and isolated as a T. Williams' hero but his tragic status acquires most of its significance in the fact that his behavior affects his society whose written and unwritten laws he needs to respect in order to survive in harmony with the other individuals. His failure to cope with the codes of this society does not lead only to his personal catastrophe but destroys Catherine's happiness and creates a threat to the survival of Marco's family in the same way that, indifferent of social status, Oedipus' passion had been an imminent omen to his polis and society. Consequently, involvement is the key - theme of every Miller play. On the other hand, this does not deprive the hero of his private characteristics, for the definition which Miller had initially given to his tragedy as "a more exalted kind of consciousness which makes aware of what the character might have been"⁴, reestablishes his heroes among the characters of the contemporary 'individual theatre', which are tormented with the fear of not living up to their chosen image of what they should be in this world. To support the above the tragic end of Eddie Carbone comes as the inevitable consequence of his refusal to live like "a patsy" (p. 120); he rises in tragic stature because of his unwillingness to remain passive and "settle for half" (p. 159). In 'Arthur Miller and the Idea of Modern Tragedy' M. W. Steinberg is correct in his assertion:

As he moves towards greater emphasis of character, Miller has been making the protagonist a worthier opposite to the forces he struggles against. He has been giving his common man tragic stature and the result has been a strengthening and an intensifying of the tragic quality in his plays.⁵

4. —, *The Theater Essays of Arthur Miller* (New York: The Viking Penguin Press, 1978), p. 4.

5. Arthur Miller, *A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Twentieth Century Views, 1969), p. 93.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Μαρία Κουτσοσυδάκη, Ψηλά από τη Γέφυρα του Άρθουρ Μίλλερ:
μια τραγωδία για όλες τις εποχές

Το *Ψηλά από τη Γέφυρα* (1955), ένα από τα «κοινωνικά θεατρικά» τού Άρθουρ Μίλλερ, φανερώνει την ιδιότυπη προσωπική εκτίμηση της αρχαίας ελληνικής τραγωδίας από το συγγραφέα. Στις σημειώσεις του αναφέρει ότι το έργο «πρέπει να είναι μια αναπροσαρμογή του Ελληνικού μύθου που χτυπά μια παλιά θαμμένη καμπάνα στο υποσυνείδητό του».

Τόσο η θεματική αναφορά στο μύθο όσο και η τεχνική δομή επιβεβαιώνουν την ελληνική ταυτότητα του έργου. Η φωνή του χορού, συγκεντρωμένη σε ένα από τα πρόσωπα, υπογραμμίζει τη δύναμη των εξωτερικών δυνάμεων που προσδιορίζουν τη μοίρα του ανθρώπου. Χαρακτηριστικό της τραγικότητας του ήρωα είναι πως η υποταγή στα πάθη του επιδρά καταστροφικά όχι μόνο στον ίδιο, αλλά και στο άμεσο και έμμεσο κοινωνικό περιβάλλον που τους γραπούς και άγραφους νόμους του οφείλει να σέβεται.

Ο Μίλλερ προσαρμόζει με δικό του τρόπο την καθολικότητα και διαχρονικότητα τού αρχαίου δράματος σε καταστάσεις και προβλήματα της εποχής μας. Ο πρωταγωνιστής του δεν είναι ο ημίθεος ή ευγενής της αρχαίας ελληνικής τραγωδίας, αλλά ένας απλός βιοπαλαιστής που το αναπόφευκτο της συμμετοχής του στα κοινά τον κάνει να διαφέρει από τα κοινωνικά απομονωμένα άτομα που κυριαρχούν στο θέατρο τού εικοστού αιώνα.