

Electra in Palm Springs: A Daughter's Vengeance in Jon Robin Baitz's *Other Desert Cities*

Dr. Ernest I. Nolan
Madonna University
36600 Schoolcraft Road, Livonia
MI 48150, USA

Jon Robin Baitz claims that the title of his play, *Other Desert Cities*, was inspired by a road sign on Interstate 10 in California, indicating the exit to Palm Springs and Other Desert Cities. Baitz explains what struck when he first saw the sign:

There's the turn-off for Palm Springs and then you see a sign: And Other Desert Cities, and it goes out into this huge existential desert of America, surrounded by Joshua trees and windmills, and you just don't know what's out there ... and it's terrifying. And wonderful. (Gray)

Baitz was intrigued by the images conjured by this phrase, which connects the contemporary action and issues of the play with a host of historical and cultural associations. First, the phrase resonates back to the ancient Near East, the cradle of Western civilization, where desert tribes founded the first cities, created centralized government, codified laws, invented writing, and, by the Middle Ages, developed trade routes, along which caravans linked the East to Western Europe. The contrast between “modern, civilized life” and the desert life of nomads, with their codes of honor and retributive justice, fuels the action of the play and informs motive and behavior. The association of the phrase “Other Desert Cities” to trade also creates an ironic link to the conservative political orientation of Polly and Lyman Wyeth; the creed of Gordon Gekko, antihero of the 1987 film *Wall Street*, aphorized by his statement, “Greed, for lack of a better word, is good,” and the unrestrained impulse to make a profit seem to characterize contemporary corporate America and the scions of the G.O.P. In this vein, Polly explains her fundraising for the Republican Party in the following way: “I have a stake in upholding the entrepreneurial spirit” (24).

However, a second and more primal association of the phrase “Other Desert Cities” springs from the fact that theatre as an art form conjures up the ancient cities of Athens, Epidaurus, Troy, and Mycenae—the settings and performance sites of the first dramatists in the Western Canon, Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. If you think of the fact that many Greek tragedies focus on the family and take place in the public space of a royal family home, we again see parallels with *Other Desert Cities*, where the action takes place in the public space of the Wyeth home, the living room. Palm Springs can be imagined as an oasis in the desert, a place of respite along life's journey for two publicity-shy ex-political celebrities. The Wyeth daughter Brooke describes her parents as “two people who lived very public lives and then hid in the desert” (Baitz 44). The focus of this play is trained squarely on the daughter, Brooke, who reincarnates a figure from ancient Greek legend who lives in plays written by all three ancient Greek tragedians—Electra. Defined by her nearly pathological mourning for her father, Agamemnon, Electra rails against her father's murderers, her mother and her mother's lover, as we see in Sophocles' *Electra*:

Lewis Campbell Translation

. . . how oft have ye
Heard many a piercing moan,
Many a blow full on my bleeding breast,
When gloomy night
Hath slackened pace and yielded to the day!
And through the hours of rest,
Ah! well 'tis known

David Grene Translation

. . . how many keening dirges,
how many plangent strokes
laid on breast till the beast was bloody,
have you heard from me
when the darkling night withdrew?
And again in the house of my misery
my bed is witness to my all-night sorrowing

To my sad pillow in yon house of woe,
 What vigil of scant joyance keeping,
 Whiles all within are sleeping,
 For my dear father without stint I groan,
 Whom not in bloody fray
 The War-god in the stranger-land
 Received with hospitable hand,
 But she that is my mother, and her groom,
 As woodmen fell the oak,
 Cleft through the skull with murdering stroke.
 And o'er this gloom
 No ray of pity, save from only me,
 Goes forth on thee,
 My father, who didst die
 A cruel death of piteous agony.
 But ne'er will I
 Cease from my crying and sad mourning lay,
 While I behold the sky,
 Glancing with myriad fires, or this fair day.

dirges for my unhappy father.
 Him in the land of the foreigner
 no murderous god of battles entertained.
 But my mother and the man who shared her
 bed,
 Aegisthus, split his head with a murderous ax,
 like woodsmen with an oak tree.
 For all this no pity was given him,
 by any but me, no pity for your death,
 father, so pitiful, so cruel.
 But, for my part, I
 will never cease my dirges and sorrowful
 laments . . .
 here before the doors of what was my father's
 house
 I shall cry out my sorrow for all the world to
 hear. (130)

Electra is resolved to avenge her father's death and anticipates the return of her brother, Orestes, who was taken from the palace as an infant and carried off to another country, to exact justice. Brooke's conflict with her parents grows out of the suicide of her brother, who, she believes, was rejected by his parents because his political beliefs conflicted with their own.

Contention within the Wyeth family between the parents and their children is aggravated by the contemporary political associations of the setting of the play in 2004, a year after the U.S. invasion of Iraq that was initiated under the leadership of President George W. Bush. In fact, explicit reference to the Iraq War occurs early in the play:

Lyman picks up the Los Angeles Times.

LYMAN: (reading) Huh. Look at this: Don Rumsfeld is paying a visit to the troops in Baghdad.

POLLY: Isn't that a nice thoughtful Christmas present.

BROOKE: Maybe while he's out in the desert he can dig up some of them weapons of mass destruction—

TRIP: *NO! No! No discussion of the war.* This is a cardinal goddamn rule—we'll be here all day, and I want to get back in time so that you can see my show. (5)

The audience is aware of the irony of war and violence happening in the desert cities of Iraq while Americans like the Wyeths are celebrating their Christmas holiday in safe, comfortable homes. The war-wracked desert cities of the world intrude on the family's interactions because of the far right orientation of Lyman and Polly and the liberal-leaning attitudes of Brooke and her brother Trip. Lyman Wyeth, a former movie star, former chair of the G.O.P., and former ambassador during the presidency of his friend and kindred spirit, Ronald Reagan, boasts of solidly Republican political credentials, and his wife, Polly, models herself on Nancy Reagan as the power behind her husband, choreographing Lyman's life. She explains her self-imposed role in life in the following dialogue:

TRIP: Hey, mom. We were talking about the Hilary movies. Why'd you stop writing pictures? Maybe you should get back in the game.

POLLY: My full-time job was your father. When he became GOP chair it didn't seem appropriate. Also, Hollywood stopped being fun. (beat) At first pictures were fun, being a girl, a smart girl in the pictures. Right out of Bryn Mawr, and into the writer's building at MGM. And when your aunt and I didn't want to work together anymore, I never found anyone else to write with. But truly, once it became about drugs and lefties whining, I was out.

BROOKE: Lefties whining. It always comes back to that. Doesn't it? With you?

POLLY: Well. *You do*. All of you! You all whine and lecture and preach.

BROOKE: Yep, that's the downfall of us all, Polly, lefties whining all over the place. (exiting) I gotta go. I don't want to be late for my conference call with Al-Qaeda. (17)

Later in the play, Polly explains her obsession with controlling information and keeping a lid on anything that might reflect poorly on Lyman and her family:

I was taught by Nancy, who was like a big sister to me—that to control everything, every bit of information, every gesture, every pose, that was the way to live. Order. Precision. Discipline. (60)

One of the burdens that Polly must bear is that her Gen X children repudiate the political sympathies that Lyman and she have built their lives on. The culture wars and political divisiveness have a long history in the Wyeth household—all the way back to the Vietnam era when Brooke's older brother, Henry, was told to leave his parent's home because of his counter-culture ideas and life style. Polly characterizes Henry's rebellion in the following way:

The story of your brother. It's drugs. Your whole generation awash in drugs. The provocations, the absurd beard, the refusal to shower, to bathe, to adhere to the basic civilities of family life. He was stoned from the age of fifteen on, it made him dumb and it triggered his depression. (34)

Henry eventually takes up with a Weathermen-type, anti-war activist group that plants a bomb in an Army recruiting station, inadvertently killing a homeless Vietnam veteran who happened to be inside.

The public telling of this family story includes the story of Henry's suicide by drowning himself in the freezing water off a ferryboat from Seattle to Canada. The fallout for the family is severe, however, attaching scandal to what Polly's sister Silda calls, "The *Life* magazine picture of this family" (50). Lyman as political power broker loses face because of his son's radical associations, underground activities, and, ultimately, criminal behavior, and the Wyeths run the risk of being socially ostracized by his conservative cronies. Lyman describes the time after Henry's suicide when his friends abandoned him as follows:

I never wrote my memoir, because it would have hurt our friends, how hard it was after Henry was implicated the way he was, how they all vanished and your mother refused to accept it. She circled the wagons. Around me. Borne out of thinking I'm easily bruised . . . But she would not let them off the hook, she's the only woman to have faced down Nancy Reagan, Betsy Bloomingdale, and Mrs. Annenberg at the same lunch and reduced them all to tears. Tears of shame for their unconscionable behavior—as though I had placed that bomb. Your mother reminded them all who we really were, and of their obligations to honor loyal friends—Nancy went to Ronnie and sat him down, they had a dinner for us at the L.A. Country Club and everyone came out. Yes. Now they were friends again. And by the time Ronnie was president, they made me ambassador . . . (40).

Lyman and Polly eventually survive the scandal, and Lyman's political career continues to flourish, but the impact on Brooke is devastating and leaves her with a lifetime of mourning over the brother she describes as her "best friend" (12). Like Electra, Brooke is fixated on the death, as we see in the following dialogue:

LYMAN: It's collateral damage. I don't expect you could know about what that feels like, my darling.

BROOKE: (quietly) How can you say that. "I don't know what it feels like." I lost my older brother. He was my best friend—you know, and I don't make friends easily; he was—most of my world and—then he was gone—

LYMAN: You still miss him.

BROOKE: Every day, most of the day, all day. (12)

Later, Brooke explains to her parents why she had to imagine the details of her brother's death when she was writing her memoir:

BROOKE: To try to make sense of it. What that day was like for him. Drowning.

LYMAN: (bewildered) Why?

BROOKE: Because I think I died too.

LYMAN: (imploring) But you didn't, darling. Look at you. You're right here. You have a life. You struggled. Yes. I know you were scarred but all things considered, haven't you prevailed?

BROOKE: *This* is prevailing? (beat) My brother killed himself. He was my best friend and he didn't even leave me a note. Why did he leave *you* a note, and not me? That doesn't make any sense. To jump off a ferry in freezing water? Never found. You don't leave people that way. It's stealing their life as well. (35)

Brooke's compulsive grief for her brother ultimately leads to a nervous breakdown that results in hospitalization. Polly responded by giving herself over to nursing Brooke back to normalcy, until Brooke reaches a state of equilibrium through a combination of psychoanalysis and medication. Brooke tells Lyman,

Look—I take my lovely little pills, and I see the blessed Doctor Leighton every week, twice a week, and I do yoga, and I eat right, and I have learned optimism just like the magazines told us to do. And now I know how to handle it. (12)

But deep in her being, Brooke feels a need to expiate the family sin, a sin she is somehow complicit in. Lyman diagnoses Brooke's depression in the following way:

You have so much of your mother in you. You don't like any weakness, especially in yourself. You can't forgive it. (beat) It's why you ended up in a damn hospital! Well—if you can't forgive yourself, I suppose it's futile to ask you to forgive me! No. (his voice rises) So you'll publish your book and punish us all. (41)

Like Electra, Brooke is compelled to avenge the agents of her loved one's death. At two different points, Trip asks Brooke whether she is "looking for an apology" (43) or seeking "revenge" (47) by writing her memoir, which, he points out, paints his parents "as right-wing socio-paths whose ideology destroyed their children's live" (46). Polly recognizes the loss of face that will accompany the publication of the book and resents the fact that it will show "up on the bedside tables of the liberal elite across the land" (29). But Trip comes closer to describing what the publication of the book will mean for his parents:

I mean, this will sort of kill them. Doesn't that count in this life? Notwith-standing whatever may have happened in the past, doesn't that count? (48).

But Brooke feels restricted and diminished by her family obligations; she says, "I am suddenly so tired of the indentured servitude of having a family" (54). Like Electra, she feels oppressed by her family circumstances, especially by Polly's constant hectoring; she says, "All I see is a bully who has lost touch with gentleness and kindness. That is what I see; there are many other ways of being. And yours, I just fail to understand it" (59). Sophocles' Electra also focuses her hatred on her mother and rails against her mother's abuse:

Lewis Campbell Translation

. . . when I see
Their crowning insolence,—our regicide
Laid in my father's chamber beside her,
My mother—if she still must bear the name
When resting in those arms? Her shame is
dead . . .
That so-called princess of a noble race
O'ercrows my wailing with loud obloquy:
'Hilding! are you alone in grief? Are none
Mourning for loss of fathers but yourself?
'Fore the blest Gods! ill may you thrive, and ne'er
Find cure of sorrow from the powers below!

David Grene Translation

Watching the ultimate act of insult,
my father's murderer in my father's bed
with my wretched mother—if mother I should call
her,
this woman sleeps with him . . .
For this woman, all nobility in words,
abuses me: "You hateful thing, God-hated,
are you the only one whose father is dead?
Is there no one else of human kind in mourning?
My curse upon you! May the Gods below
grant you from your present sorrows no
release!" (136)

Also like Electra, Brooke understands that publishing her book will avenge her brother's death by exacting a kind of death on her parents, but in this case it involves being reviled socially by both friends and enemies alike, a social death that they will never recover from.

In a Greek tragedy, the arc of the play would eventually lead to death, to, perhaps, Polly and Lyman retreating to their rooms to commit ritual suicide or at least Lyman clutching his chest and expiring from a stress-induced heart attack. But this is Palm Spring, not Athens, and Polly and Lyman are no more capable of going to their graves hiding their secret truth than they are of allowing a fictitious and damaging version of their life story to be made public. Reversal happens in the play when the parents confess the fact that they helped their son to escape capture and legal prosecution by taking him to Canada. For almost 40 years they have carefully concealed this truth, telling no one, despite recriminations, despite their own impulses to reunite with their son, despite the visible negative effects their secrecy is having on their daughter. They endure it all in order to ensure that their son can live out his life in freedom.

Polly's and Lyman's confession causes Brooke to re-evaluate her life, to shift paradigms about her parents, the past, and her own need for revenge. At the end of the play she realizes that who she is, how she has defined herself as the designated mourner for her brother Henry, will need to change. In the following scene Brooke faces the immensity of this truth:

And Brooke is suddenly on her feet, and snatches the manuscript out of [Polly's] hand and flings half of it at her father and half at her mother, and pages fly about, up into the air, hit the Wyeths and drift to the floor.

BROOKE: I have spent years trying to—I have spent YEARS! YEARS! Of my life! In the fucking . . . (a rush of words) When I was in the hospital I tried to hold on and not kill myself because it would have been too much for you to have lost *two* children that way, and he gave me permission to do it, by having done it, he paved the way and I wanted to follow him! Every day I have to find my footing and not do— (63)

Brooke's reaction signals that she has been suicidal through most of her adult life because of a lie. Her parents did not fail their son; she too is not guilty, and no member of her family contributed to Henry's death because it never happened. She can forgive her parents; she can forgive herself. Even though she survived her brother, she bears no guilt because there was no death. In a 2011 interview with Kevin Sessums for *The Daily Beast*, *Newsweek's* online news medium, Baitz made the following comment about the importance of self-forgiveness within the context of family and community; he said,

[Forgiving yourself] is something you have to learn to do or you'll end up phenomenally bitter . . . I think the kind of anger required to live [without forgiveness in your heart] will also drive you mad. But in order to forgive yourself, you have to first come to terms with all the things you don't know and all the assumptions you've made, which is an active part of this play. To me, also, on a profound level, the play is about the emergence of humility in human nature and how vital that is. Again and again one is reminded of how little one knows. I live in real doubt about most things. I think I know something about what people feel, and yet that may just be a vivid projection. So I've become tentative as I get older about my claims. For example, the older I get the less simplistic my politics are.

Politics—or how a human beings function and negotiate within a social context, starting with the family unit—serve as more than just an aspect of the Wyeth family dynamic. We hear Silda, for instance, characterize Brooke's memoir as being about “two true believers. Who never let go” (56). Polly's and Lyman's seeming rigidity, their steadfast adherence to conservative values, reflects what Silda sees as a worldview that the contemporary Republican Party has taken to extreme:

The zealots who have taken over your party and *marinated* it in tolerance. You guys let it happen. You are incapable of speaking out, even while finding fault with it in private. (beat) And you live in that complicity every day. A war in which so many people are dying in a desert, thousands of miles away. *Because* it's a war declared by a man whose father is someone with whom you occasionally *dine*, you keep silent. *That* is what true believers do. *That, that's* what your daughter has written. (56)

In the Sessums interview, Baitz made explicit his take on the politics of the right; he said,

In many ways the underlying notions—as simplistic as they are—of conservative thinking are that they insist on living with rigor. That’s admirable. The awful part of such thinking is the failure of the imagination. There are just two more and more diametrically opposed views of the world now, and there is a yearning in this play for those to come together. And yet I have watched the de-evolution of conservative politics into something profoundly anti-intellectual and profoundly malignant and ahistorical . . . there was a longing on my part in this play—maybe even romantic of me—to rediscover a level of humanism in conservatism, which seems to have been rejected entirely out of hand. Yet there is a critique in this play that they did this to themselves. You let this happen to your own party, your agenda, your own philosophy. On many levels, this play is finally an examination of how it is to live with being complicit.

According to Polly, this is the lesson learned by Henry after waking up from his idealistic and romantic attachment to radical politics—that everyone is complicit, that it is impossible to live totally according to one’s most deeply held ideals. Polly relates the dawning of this realization on Henry after she cleans him up for their journey to Canada in the following way:

. . . who’s going to stop a lady in a blue Eldorado convertible and her clean-cut son? (beat) He cleaned up so easily, with his hair cut, he stills looked fifteen; gone was the beard, gone were the rags, just put him in jeans and a Brooke Brothers shirt and comb his hair and . . . it was so easy. At first we didn’t speak. Almost at all. And then he talked. Most of it, still entirely self-deluded, at first, but finally he just cried, “I have blood on my hands now, too.” (beat) [and Polly replies,] “Everyone has blood on their hands today.” And more silence. Sleep. It was so easy, you could just cross over, day trippers, really, before terror became the . . . (beat, disgust) . . . *profession* that it is today. (62)

Lyman and Polly have lived complicit lives since Henry’s faked suicide, with yearly visits from the FBI and periodic phone calls from someone who hangs up, which they think is their son checking in. Lyman describes what this complicit life was like in the following way:

I could have died then, I really didn’t care. Your mother insisted that I live. And that we thrive. (beat) So, I get called to Bohemian Grove and I go, I host events, I have people here and I always think “if these men knew who I was . . .” But I can never show a trace of it. Because I can never show a trace of it. Because I think “if I can pass as one of them, they will never know what I did.” But acting, you know, is easy for me, it’s easy. And I know he’s alive, there’s that, we do know that, the phone, you know, it does ring. There IS a click. He is silent. He is there. (62-3)

In the final analysis, Trip may voice the author’s most salient point about how human beings negotiate the complex and danger-filled web of social relationships, especially those based on love. He remonstrates with Polly and Brooke in the following way as they argue over publishing the memoir:

I say that we all live with each other’s divergent truths and in spite of having deeply conflicting accounts, which don’t matter anyway anymore—(growing rage, finally it all comes out and it is scary)—Because it’s in the *past!* (beat) And we’re all getting older and if this is heading toward desolation, which I can see it is, you will all regret it, so give your daughter a pass and your sister, too, both of you, stop fighting like weasels in a pit, because on your last day on this planet, you’ll be scared and it won’t matter as you take your last breath—all what will have mattered is how you’ve loved. (beat) And I’m out. I’m done. That’s all I got. (55)

Trip’s lines echo Baitz’s own words as he responds to being described as “a deeply moral writer” by interviewer Stephen Gaghan in *Bomb Magazine*:

Writing is such a dangerous avocation, when it comes to your image of yourself. Moral playwright. Queer playwright, slickster, hipster, schtickmeister, pedant. The connotations upset me: sententious, lecturing, hectoring, scolding, etc. I am a confused playwright . . . How to live? I ask, how, please, someone tell me. Honestly, quietly, affectionately, sure. But how? I write from doubt and confusion, inchoate stuff only coalescing on the page. I know so little and suspect so much. People speak. People test the waters with words and with verbal stunts. Language is so often about dominance, isn't it? Belief takes vast reserves of energy and is a draining and perpetual act of will . . . , I have no faith in certitude, either moral or intellectual.

What happens at the end of the play? The stage directions give us the following clues about Brooke: "A bright smile. She laughs. She is happy" (65). After the revelation of the truth about her brother Henry, Brooke does move in next door to her parents and says that she fully enjoyed the fun she had with Polly. Her parents die reconciled with Brooke and she writes a different book. From the passage from her memoir that she reads to the bookstore audience, we see that her image of Henry has evolved from what Trip earlier described as an idealistic victim of "right wing sociopaths whose ideology destroyed their children's lives" (46) to that of a loved older brother who simply moved on in order to live his life. Baitz provides us with the story of a kind of prototypical American family struggling to maintain their bonds of love within the uncertain and unsettling vicissitudes of contemporary life.

The final vision of life Baitz leaves his audience with corresponds less to that of Aeschylus' or Sophocles' versions of *Electra* and more to that of Euripides, whose *Electra* ends his play by leaving Mycenae to marry Orestes' dearest friend, Plyades. Euripides' play ends with a *dues ex machina* when the Dioscuri, Castor and Polydeuces, the deified twin sons of Leda and the brothers of Helen of Troy and Clytemnestra, explain to Orestes that he must go to Athens and be tried for having committed the primal sin of killing his mother. The demigods tell Orestes to

Ian Johnston Translation

Give Electra to Pylades as his wife,
to take back home . . .
Since Pylades now has got a virgin wife,
let him go home and leave Achaean land,
with the man they call your brother-in-law
to the land of Phocis. He must give him
a great weight of riches.
(ll. 1509-1510, 1552-1556)

Emily Vermeule Translation

Give Plyades Electra as wife in his house,
And leave Argos yourself . . .
Let Plyades take Electra, girl and wife,
And start his journey homeward, leaving
Achaea's lands;
let him also to his Phocian estates escort
Your "brother," as they call him—set him up in
wealth.
ll. 1249-1250; 1284-1287)

Like Brooke, Euripides' *Electra* begins a new life at the end of the play, one that contrasts with her long period of mourning, a life offering a full promise of fulfilment, love, and creativity. Perhaps the same can be said for *Electra* in Euripides' play as Baitz says of *Electra*'s twenty-first-century avatar, Brooke, when *Electra* leaves with her husband-to-be to settle in Phocis: "A bright smile. She laughs. She is happy" (65).

References

- Baitz, Jon Robin. *Other Desert Cities*. NY: Grove Press, 2010.
- Euripides. *Electra*. trans. Ian Johnston, Nanaimo, BC: Malaspina University-College (<http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/euripides/electra.htm>)
- _____. *Electra*. trans. Emily Townsend Vermeule, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1959.
- Gaghan, Stephen. "Jon Robin Baitz: Hot Then, Hot Now." *Bomb Magazine*, 85/Fall 2003 (<http://bombsite.com/issues/85/articles/2602>).
- Gray, Margaret. "Jon Robin Baitz gets back to basics at Ojai Playwrights Conference," *Los Angeles Times*, August 10, 2010 (<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/aug/10/entertainment/la-et-jon-robin-baitz-20100810>).
- Sessums, Kevin. "Broadway's Comeback Kid," *The Daily Beast*, November 2, 2011 (<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/11/02/jon-robin-baitz-talks-about-his-new-play-david-mamet-more.html>).
- Sophocles. *Electra in Sophocles II*. trans. David Grene, Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1957.
- _____. *Electra*, trans. Lewis Campbell (<http://www.readbookonline.net/read/OnLine/40301/>)