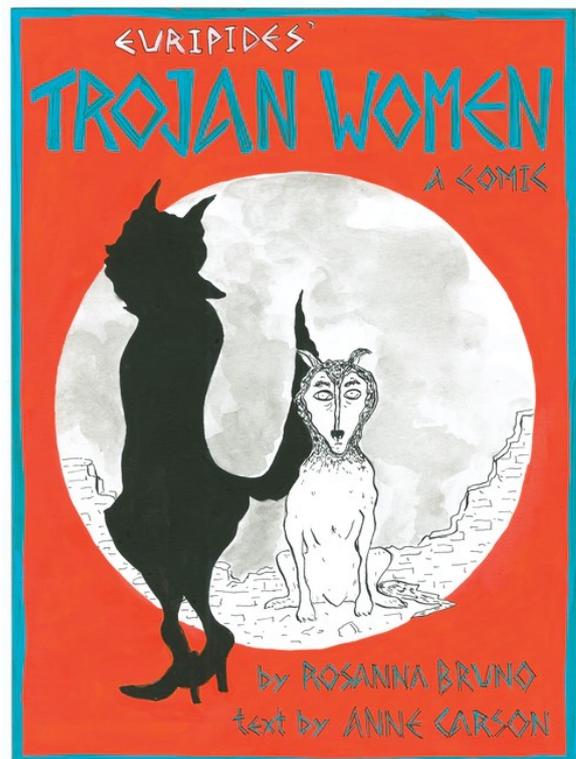


Slanted Translation[s]: An Interview with artist Rosanna Bruno

Rosanna Bruno is a New York-based artist who makes paintings, ceramics, comics, and bad puns. She received a New York Foundation for the Arts fellowship in 2012 and has received fellowships from Yaddo, the Rauschenberg Foundation, and LMCC. Her work has been published in *The Paris Review*, *BOMB*, *TLS*, *The Toast* and *The Daily Beast*, among others. Bruno's first book, *The Slanted Life Of Emily Dickinson* (Andrews McMeel, 2017) is a book of cartoons based on the myth of the poet's life. Her newest book, a collaboration with poet and classicist Anne Carson, is a comic-book version of Euripides's *The Trojan Women* (New Directions, 2021).

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Obliquity is the only entry point to a cosmos in disarray and devastation. “With *The Trojan Women*, the only way I could handle the incredibly dark and tragic story was to push the images far away from what is plausible,” says Rosanna Bruno, illustrator of this new translation of Euripides’ *The Trojan Women*. The tragedy sees the tragic fates of the eponymous captives as they are apportioned as bounty after the Greeks have ravaged the city. In 415 BC, Euripides’ drama was, if not radical in its subject matter, then at least unusual in its approach. Rather than examine the imperialist exploits of the Greek victors, Euripides shifted the tragic focus onto the aftermath of the war as experienced by the weakest and most vulnerable group of survivors, setting it in a fairly unique position among other Greek texts such as the Homeric epics, Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Sophocles’ *Ajax*.

If Euripides’ tragedy was already unconventional, then this comic-book version pulls out all the stops. Anne Carson is well-versed in the brazen exercise of poetic licence and her translation here is also gloriously loose. At heart a visual, not verbal artist,¹ Carson’s metaphors are luminous and devastating. Rosanna Bruno tenderly works with Carson’s words to drive home the poignant tragedy, her black-and-white illustrations stark yet generous, and never austere. Thumbing my way slowly through the comic, I am filled with the sense that this collaboration catches in its palm the sad scraps and suggestive images that were dropped by the Ancient text centuries ago, and unfurls its fingers to reveal something dear, misshapen and immediate. I spoke with Rosanna Bruno over email in early 2022 about tragedy, humour and seeing things at a slant.

“I think I make art to be surprised,” says the artist. “I was also responding to Anne’s text, which is always full of surprises! It gave me permission to go anywhere — and I did.” *The Trojan Women* is surprising, not least because the women are, in fact, a crestfallen mob of dogs and cows. At their head is the play’s pivotal character, Hekube, “an ancient emaciated

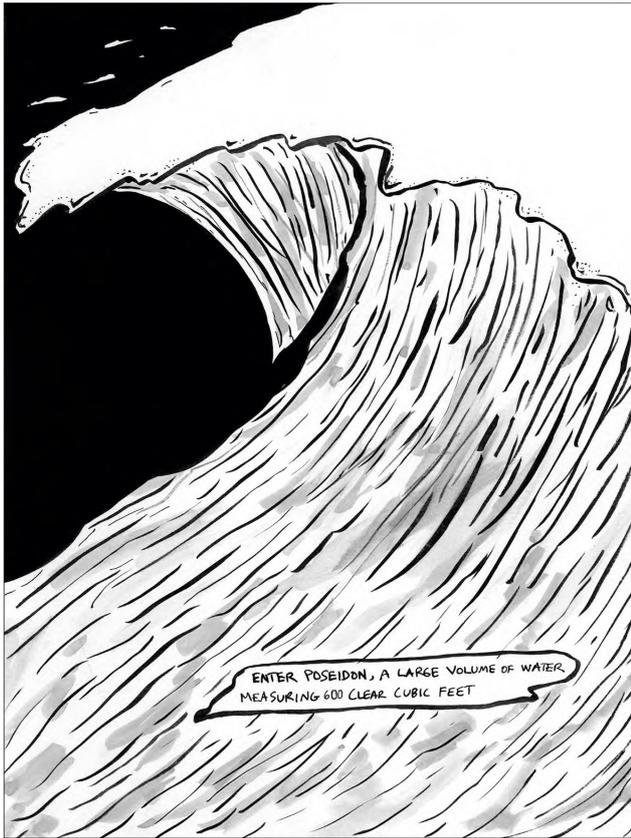
¹ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/anne-carson>

sled dog of filth and wrath” — literally. Bruno limns this figure, the dethroned queen of Troy in mourning for the death of her fifty children, as a prostrate dog of supreme dignity, with a mangy coat and wary eyes. In other Ancient texts, Hekube is described *after* her death as a “she-dog with fiery eyes”. To cast Hekube as a dog *here* implies that the conditions of her life are such that they border on death itself. Though the translation steers entirely clear of animal onomatopoeias, Bruno’s illustrations stir up a soundscape of howls, yips and bays that reveals something about the incommunicability of pain. These doleful cries enact and amplify the choral task of ritual lament, and the gregarious nature of dogs and cows unites them in mournful, interspecies camaraderie as they cling together among the wreckage, reduced to livestock behind sharp scratches of barbed wire fence. Yes, it is surprising to see the Greek chorus canine-ised — but it does make it all the more dear and moving.



Carson and Bruno have no preservationist motivations toward the Ancient text, but certain theatrical elements persevere. “We decided to keep the stage directions with the images because we wanted to make it feel like we are watching a play, as opposed to simply reading it.” Jagged labels provide indications such as “Enter Poseidon, a large volume of water measuring 600 clear cubic feet.” — how much more wildly affective can you get than a rumbling, snow-capped tsunami sweeping across the page? Bruno worked panel by A4 panel, illustrating mostly without reference to her previous pages. “I chose this way of dealing with each page mainly because I was overwhelmed by what I had to do. I don't mean overwhelmed in a practical sense —in terms of deadlines, etc.— I mean I was overwhelmed by the nature of the project. I would sit each day with these incredible words and the only way I could turn them into images was to stay there in that moment and zero in on what I saw.” Bruno’s real-time encountering of each tragic moment as it comes builds a cadence of shifting textures, greyscale combinations and panel layouts. This working methodology contributes to the feeling of watching a play, where theatrical momentum is built by the replacement of each dramatic moment by the next. The tragedy’s slow and inevitable advance gains impetus until its full force is brought to bear on the unknowing characters, as if pitching down a hill. I note that even the hand-lettering becomes increasingly lean and spiky as each tragic consequence imprints itself onto me. Bruno is amused, “I would love to say that I thought all this out ahead of time, but really, it just happened naturally. But I agree, the end result does have a sort of live-theatre feel to it.”

Poseidon and the canine chorus are not the only non-human forms. In fact, the only anthropomorph is Cassandra, whose clairvoyance casts her as supra-human after all. Andromache is a poplar tree, and her baby son Astyanax a rootling. Helen, already a



shapeshifter in Euripides and the cause of all this mess, is instantiated now as a silver, dew-clawed fox, now as a handheld mirror, and finally as a fox holding a mirror. For Bruno, the refusal to look back as she worked meant there was less opportunity to edit herself. “If I looked back too much, then I would question such choices as a talking tree, or a fox in stilettos wearing a fox fur coat. It might have been a totally different book.” The intuitive nature of her approach glints through, even when its effects feel mystifying or unobvious. “So much of what I do is just feeling my way around and I am lucky when I land on something.” This unseeingly feeling her way around, this palpating until she seizes on something minute that can billow out into something else entirely — it seems what Bruno is doing here is translation too, as long as we conceive of translation not as the necessary betrayal of a pure original, but rather as a force for the generation of meaning.

Bruno assents. “Images have a different sort of power. They’re like another layer that can support and accentuate the emotional tenor of a work. And layering is like movement, or a kind of travelling.” For me, Bruno’s illustrations drive home the point that figuration and abstraction are, in fact, the same impulse: each brushstroke that taken towards a far-flung representation is a step towards exactitude and specificity. “I think of it as a way of going against what is expected — not accepting the outline of something but pushing the edges and seeing if you can’t make another form.” In the Bloodaxe Books launch of *The Trojan Women*, Carson remarks on the surprising plausibility of Bruno’s depiction of Andromache as a talking tree.² For Bruno, the relationship between surprise and plausibility is a kind of distilling: “Categories do not move me closer to clarity, they move me further away, further from the centre. I find that when I push something it becomes very clear.”

Pushing, destabilising, tilting. At the outset of *The Trojan Women*, Hekube raises her hound head with the words “Start me up left leg”, her lopsided body intimating the canted angle at which the story must be seen. Encountering Bruno’s illustrations feels as though the text were materialising outside of itself, in a sort of semantic emancipation. If in *Autobiography of Red* Carson was “undoing the latches of being,” here the illustrations are similarly unbridling. There are no latches where doors are left swinging off their hinges by troops whose ravages surpass the architectural. I ask Bruno about this instability, and how it spills out of the realm of the thematic and into the comic’s formal structuring. “I intentionally didn’t choose the standard grid-like sequential panel layout for this book, as I think the

² <https://vimeo.com/557271704>

subject was too big for such constraints.” When Andromache learns her son Astyanax is to be sacrificed, Bruno inks page after page in swathes of deep, desperate black, overlaid by the illustrations in white. The effect is akin to a photographic negative. These panels are fragmented into three horizontal, tilting sections with Andromache’s willowy figure draped diagonally across the entire page. The sheer force of emotion in the face of this impossible act renders her body uncontainable. Bruno almost excuses this, “I come to comics from a messier background, painting. I am not very technically proficient in the comics form, so everything has a very scruffy feel to it.” However, this portrayal pushes Andromache past the limits of humanity and across the physical borders of the panel — and perhaps we can see her pain more clearly now.



Some panels occupy an entire page, others spread across two. At other points, Bruno alternates between circular, spotlight-like frames and amorphous slippery. Some frames provide a cinematic zoom-in to an expression, such as Hekube’s wide-eyed howl of “NO NO NO NO NO” reflected in her eyes, the words peppered in her pupils. Every time I encounter the panels anew, I find another detail, something that has escaped me in previous visitations. The comic book genre often evinces a concern for knowledge and access to knowledge: details glimpsed out of the corner of an eye, subtextual nuances tucked away in the corners of panels, or nimble word-image play. With Bruno’s illustrations too, it takes sitting with an image to fully or even partially take in its content. “I am always interested in making connections, whether visual, textual or verbal,” says Bruno. “It’s like movement for me, or a kind of travelling: a way to see the same thing from all angles.” Such are the sequences that have Troy in ruins as their backdrop — the ransacked city comes into being as “Hotel Troy,” a derelict motel of torn-down blinds and boarded-up windows. Nearby lies a sea of graves. One is garlanded with a minuscule wreath that proclaims “#1 DAD”. Another spells out “HERO”. A third simply “LOVE”. Euripides’ play has little action — it is a

play of ululating laments rather than dramatic peaks — and as such, the characters take on a largely explanatory role to further the narrative. Here Bruno has shifted the narrative propulsion out of these bodies and into another form — a tiny facsimile of the tabloid newspaper *WAR-EXPRESS* announces: “HERO HEKTOR FALLS! Trojan Warrior Loses Fight and Gains Fame (full story on page 6)”.

I ask Bruno about her first and critically acclaimed comic *The Slanted Life of Emily Dickinson* (2017), convinced I discern a drive to “Tell all the truth but tell it slant” in *The Trojan Women* too. “I see everything as slanted to begin with, so why not exploit that?” replies Bruno, whose Instagram handle is @aslantedlife. “Dickinson encourages a circuitous route to the truth, and that resonates with me.” Here, again, is the sense that the anguish of murder, slavery, and rape cannot be encountered head-on. It must be deconstructed, muddled, reassembled. There may be something improbable about a child depicted as a turnip-like rootling — however, there is something even more unthinkable about a child whose broken skull bones “show through as if trying to smile”. Bruno’s bold *slanting* has an epistemologically destabilising effect, and her crude and evocative imagery knock our perception to an angle.

One of these angles, says Bruno, is comedy. “Another element in my work is always humour, which is a great tool to shake things up. It really helps bring things into sharp focus.” Tell this to sharp-witted Athena, who materialises as a pair of Carhartt dungarees with an owl mask tucked under one strap. Humour as a counterpoint to tragedy is a well-known and exercised device — Carson even includes a quote from the master of dark humour, Beckett, as the chorus’ closing remark. Much of *The Trojan Women*’s verbal humour pulls from the Ancient text itself. It is Euripides who, when Hekube warns Menelaus not to share a boat with Helen lest she seduce him, has Menelaus ask stupidly “What, has she put on weight?”. Bruno and Carson push this further by depicting Menelaus as a complicated “gearbox or coupling mechanism — critically, it is “last years model”, intuiting the fact that Helen will, in fact, swindle him. “The combination of word and image can operate on many levels. Most of the time, words make all the difference!”



Visual humour and word-image play become a caesura, a point of respite from the tragic happenings. Polyxena, sacrificed at Achilles’ tomb as an offering to the Gods, is shown crouching next to the grave reading *The Foot Book* — could she possibly be reading up on heels? A self-confessed lover of bad puns, Bruno stylises the forlorn motel sign as “HOTEL TROY,” its neon flashing arrow still angling towards the door. “Making *The Trojan Women* was a lot of fun. I made most of it during lockdown, so to immerse myself in an Ancient tragedy really took

me out of our current one.” What I learn from Bruno is that looking at things sideways is a prolific endeavour, full of dynamism and emotion. When I ask Bruno about what she’s currently working on she mentions another comic book. “I have been thinking of a graphic memoir centred around my mother. I have a collection of notes I’ve written for that. When she died in 2017, I found I could not go there. Lately, I have been thinking maybe I can... I am also working on a graphic essay about my experience with sleep apnea. I find it very difficult to make overtly autobiographical work. I’m hoping my self-deprecating sense of humour might help with that!”

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